

Turning Points and Trajectories Within Long Distance

Grandparent-Grandchild Relationships

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines long-distance relationships between grandparents and their adolescent grandchild through the qualitative identification and analysis of relational turning points and trajectories. A sample of 30 grandparents yielding 99 individual turning points allowed for an in-depth understanding of these relational constructs that previous research neglects to explore from the perspective of a grandparent. A constant comparative analysis of these turning points reveals 8 distinct categories of relational turning points including Spending Time Together, Family Relational Dynamics, Geographic Distance, Lack of Relational Investment, Use of Technology, Relational Investment, Lack of Free Time, and Grandchild Gaining Independence. These turning points vary in how they positively or negatively impact relational closeness between participants and their grandchildren. The use of Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT) yields 30 individual relational trajectory graphs categorized into five trajectories including Decrease in Closeness, Increase in Closeness, Multidimensional Changes in Closeness, Minimal Changes in Closeness, and Consistent Relational Closeness. Results provide theoretical contributions to aging and family literature as well as practical findings pertaining to current and future grandparents. These implications as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the many wonderful memories of

Jean and Bill Bangerter.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The multifaceted intergenerational relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is a significant phenomenon that has been largely overlooked within social science research (Barette, Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2010; Kruk, 1995; Somary & Stricker, 1998). Current research on grandparent-grandchild relationships primarily analyzes external variables that facilitate these relationships, and neglects to qualitatively explore psychological factors within them, yielding a vague and somewhat generic understanding of the grandparent role. Furthermore, existing grandparent-grandchild research fails to explore these relationships in a long-distance context and is limited by a focus on grandparent-grandchild cohabitation. This gap in existing research creates a poor understanding of the communicative nature of these relationships (Harwood & Lin, 2000).

The most significant discrepancy in the current grandparent-grandchild scholarly literature is simply a matter of perspective; adult grandchildren are often the participants in such studies (e.g. Holladay et al., 1998; Trinder, 2009) yielding results that fail to broaden the theoretical understanding of a grandparent's perception of these significant intergenerational relationships. Thus, this study seeks to both introduce and legitimize the voice of grandparents as a primary source for exploring these relationships. It is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the grandparent role, which will inevitably increase with the steady aging of the Post-World War II baby boom demographic. Studies of this

nature yield many practical implications for these and other intergenerational relationships, within and outside of the family. Exploring the closeness of these relationships also has further interdisciplinary academic implications for psychology, gerontology, human development and family studies, family communication and health communication.

This study begins with an extensive review of current literature surrounding grandparenting, aging, and the family. The first section of this literature review will establish the sociocultural foundations of this study, highlighting the ways that ageism and stereotypes may stigmatize and undermine the grandparent role. This section will highlight literature on cultural perceptions of the elderly and grandparenting. The second section seeks to illuminate the largely underestimated diversity of the grandparent role, highlighting recent research that reflects a variety of grandparent types and functions. The next section is devoted to highlighting the importance of grandparents throughout various events and transitions within the family. The following section of this study will discuss the rationale behind utilizing turning point and RIT methodology in order to study these relationships. Several-family based studies utilizing turning point methodology will also be discussed in this section in order to legitimize the framework of this study prior to a thorough discussion of methods, procedures and participants. The next section of this research will provide results, analysis, and discussion pertaining to the findings of this study. Finally, conclusions, limitations and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

## Chapter 2

### REVIEW OF SOCIAL SCIENCE LITERATURE

#### **Ageism and Grandparent Stereotypes**

The cognitive representation of a grandparent is impacted by both positive and negative age stereotypes that may undermine the depth of the grandparent role. Grandparenthood is primarily associated with age because in order to be a grandparent, one must have a child who also has a child, which can only physically take place after a certain age. Coined by Robert Butler, *Ageism* entails inequitable behaviors based on age and may include prejudicial attitudes, discriminatory and institutional practices (Butler, 1980). Ageism may occur at any point in the lifespan; young children, pre-teens, teenagers, emerging adults, middle-aged individuals, and aging adults are all victim to different forms of ageism. However, aging adults in “old age” seem to be victims of harsh judgment as they enter the last and most mysterious developmental stage of their lifespan. Although every individual experiences ageism at different stages of the life cycle, ageism stereotypes surrounding old age are increasingly prolific in a youth-oriented society. Ageism is a biosocial concept, which is often theorized as a defense in response to death anxiety (Bodner, 2009), which is further enabled by negative social stigmas surrounding aging. Although the biases towards older adults may seem harmless, recent research indicates that there may be deeper ramifications for these stereotypes. Bugental and Hehman (2007) suggest that the negative biases towards aging adults may reduce the social and cognitive competence of aging adults. Thus, ageism is an important consideration for

researching any specific generational demographic, and is perhaps most important when researching aging adults.

The negativity associated with aging is manifested and maintained at early stages in human development and is motivated through even the most ubiquitous variables. One example of this can be found in children's stories which often depict older females as one of the following characters: the wicked old witch, the selfless godmother, or the demented hag (Henneberg, 2010). These stereotypical portrayals of aging often appear in illustrations of children's books and movies, thus children may establish a distinctive visual representation of aging at very early stages in development. This schema may carry on into adolescence and young adulthood. Cottle and Glover (2007) argue that undergraduate students possess a keen understanding of the tangible aspects of aging, relying heavily on physical characteristics to psychologically determine if an individual is "old".

Ageism is also prevalent in various forms of media including advertisements for a variety of products. Although some advertisements associate positive images with aging, they may generate subconscious associations of positive images of aging to greater negative stereotypes (such as using images of smiling or laughing adults to promote a health product), thus, both content and context of advertising may contribute to age stereotypes (Zhang et al., 2006). In examining the content of television advertisements, research by Lee, Carpenter, and Meyers (2007) indicates that older adults do not typically promote products such as apparel, games, computers and electronics, vacation and travel. Rather, older adults tend to be present in advertising for medications and medical

services, food products, cars, and financial and legal services. The context of an advertisement can significantly undermine the positive aspects of aging (Hummert, Shaner, Garstka, & Henry, 1998) and work to enhance age stereotypes present in popular culture. An example of such stereotyping is displayed in an analysis of 4,200 narrative jokes from three published collections (Bowd, 2003). In this unique analysis, Bowd identifies several age-based stereotypes including the impotent male, the unattractive female, the vain/virile male, the disinterested female, the forgetful old person, and the infirm old person. It is likely that many of these stereotypes co-exist in television and advertisements and may influence the way individuals are treated in real life further contributing to age stereotypes.

The subtle yet significant presence of age stereotypes within western society may impact the way that grandparents are treated by their grandchildren. For example, Garry and Lohan (2011) indicates that young people often underestimate happiness levels of aging adults, assuming that happiness declines with age. These negative pre-judgments play a significant role in intergenerational communication and relationships, often leading towards verbal and nonverbal patronizing or overaccommodating communication that can be ultimately damaging to an aging adult's self esteem (Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005). These factors may yield a negative stigmatization of labels of 'grandmother' and 'grandfather' which primarily manifests as an indication of old age that may be associated with images of gray hair, wrinkles, and other physical indicators of age.

These stereotypes indirectly threaten the grandparent-grandchild relationship because intergenerational communicative interactions are often based on the stereotypical age-based expectations that promote patronizing communication that is evident in tone, facial expression, and touch (Ryan, Hummert, & Boich, 1995). Beyond the communicative challenges initiated by these stereotypes, there are many psychological tensions associated with the identity of a grandparent. Grandparents are placed in a rather precarious position; from the perspective of younger family members, they are in a different “group” based on age, while also in the same family “group” (Tam, Hewstone, Harwood, Voci, & Kenworthy, 2006). The contradiction between these two positions (in group vs. out group) may serve as a catalyst for some of the psychological issues involved with the grandparent identity such as not feeling important within a family unit or not fulfilling personal expectations of the grandparent role.

There is some debate as to the impact that cultural gender norms may have on the grandparenting experience. Because some gender differences have been found in terms of expectations of becoming grandparents (Somary & Stricker, 1998), gender stereotypes may influence how grandparents feel they *should* act *prior* to becoming a grandparent. A grandparent may have solid expectations for what they want to contribute to the life of their granddaughter or grandson, however, if these expectations do not align with the interests of the grandchild or are not made possible because of other factors, one may be forced to compromise their idea of being a grandparent, perhaps settling for a small fraction of their

relational expectations as a result of their disappointing relationship with a grandchild.

Although studies have found that gender does have an impact on closeness between grandparents and their grandchildren (Barnett, Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai, & Conger, 2010; Dubas, 2001), other research indicates that maternal and paternal grandparents' closeness to grandchildren has been found to be approximately the same (Davey, Savla, Janke, & Anderson, 2009) and that gender, although it impacts closeness, has no impact on grandparent relational satisfaction (Dubas, 2001). Through analysis of self-reports from 135 pairs of grandparents and their grandchildren, Harwood (2000 a) argues that neither the sex of a grandchild nor the grandparent is a significant predictor of relational solidarity within these dyads. Furthermore, several recent studies surrounding the impact of gender on grandparenting support grandfathering as a highly individual experience that is not highly impacted by stereotypes of grandfathers as distant (Roberto, Allen, & Blieszner, 2001; Lesperance, 2010; Sorensen & Cooper, 2010). It can be gathered from this research that although the impact of grandparent gender may be inflated by stereotypes surrounding grandmother and grandfather roles, the individual experiences and satisfaction of grandparents is not contingent upon gender alone.

### **Health of Aging Family Members**

The family unit serves as a natural resource for aging adults, especially for grandparents, while confronting the many mental and physical health challenges associated with aging. While there is no specific outline for exactly how families should care for their older members, younger generations may often contribute



socially, instrumentally, or emotionally to the well-being of aging family members. Although there is some research to indicate that middle generations often feel a sense of obligation to older-adult members of the family (Cooney & Dykstra, 2011), it is likely that more families will have to alter the norms for providing care to aging adult members especially due to the rising cost of professional healthcare and assisted living. It is plausible that because of the important role of family in the health of aging adults, individuals living far from immediate family members may experience unique challenges to healthy aging.

Without the convenience of having family members in close proximity, aging adults may be at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to physical and emotional well-being. Understanding how geographic distance from family impacts aging adults is essential to improving the long distance caregiving experience (Bevan & Sparks, 2010). Thus, developing a comprehensive understanding of long-distance intergenerational relationships may serve as a valuable resource for aging adults who are separated from family.

The internet is likely to further impact long-distance relationships as the baby boom generation emerges into old age with a history and keen sense of social networking, video chat, and other forms of telecommunication. As aging adults become equipped with this knowledge, the healthcare of aging adults may become more streamlined and consistent through the use of telemedicine (Wang, 2011). Exploration into how aging adults view long-distance communication is essential to the development of new and innovative ways in which distant family members and physicians may improve their interactions with aging adults.

## **Grandparent Typology and Functionality**

A variety of research has revealed that the grandparent role functions in many different ways. From an evolutionary perspective, there is significant evidence that grandparents provide younger family generations with support and safety against adverse risks (Coall & Hertwig, 2010). Such biologically grounded motivations manifest themselves in instrumental, emotional, and psychological ways. This research suggests that grandparent-grandchild relationships are, perhaps, by nature meant to be intimate, loving, and protecting. However, it is clear through grandparent typology research that not all grandparents fulfill these innate biological duties.

Innovative research by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) initially shed light on the diversity of the grandparenting role by establishing different grandparenting styles (formal, fun-seeker, parent surrogate, reservoir of family wisdom, and the distant figure). More recent research conducted by Mueller, Wilhelm, and Elder (2002) identifies distinct clusters of grandparenting types including influential, supportive, passive, authority-oriented, and detached. It seems clear by the range of these categories that not all grandparents feel “biologically driven” to maintain these intergenerational connections, and that these relationships may be contingent upon much more than cultural expectations and evolutionary theory.

Although research by Harwood and Lin (2000) has found that the grandparent role serves as a substantial source of personal pride and positive self-image, other current research supports the notion that opposing norms of

grandparenting exist. Through analysis of 46 interviews with grandparents, Mason, May, and Clarke (2007) show that grandparents commonly identify their interactions with their grandchildren as either “not interfering” or “being there” indicating two starkly contrasting grandparent experiences. Although the authors acknowledge that the meaning of these two categories may indeed be different in practice, this contrast indicates an illusive complexity that surpasses the assumed simplicity of these relationships. This encourages researchers to learn about the grandparent role through methodology that goes beyond establishing a typology, and recognizing the individual experiences that push grandparents to identify with a specific grandparent role.

This intergenerational ambivalence is also significant when examining grandparent interaction with other family members. Through interviews with fourteen dyads of grandparents and adult-grandchildren, Hebblethwaite and Norris (2010) reveal that grandparents often feel uncertainty surrounding the extent that they are welcome to participate in family bonding activities and maintain a sense of ambiguity as to where exactly they fit into the lives of their younger family members. Resulting from a similar study examining grandparents’ written accounts with their young-adult- grandchildren, Harwood and Lin (2000) argue that grandparents feel a sense of disconnection when not included in family gatherings and activities. These gatherings often serve as an opportunity for grandparents to experience face-to-face interaction with their family members and provide a significant sense of inclusion and activity for older generations. Family

gatherings also provide essential social interaction that is likely to not only improve family relationships, but one's overall quality of life.

### **Grandparents and Blended Families**

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2002) the probability of a first marriage ending in separation or divorce within 5 years is 20%, increasing to 33% after 10 years. Thus, divorce is a reality for many families likely to impact extended family relationships as well as social ties outside of the family. The effects of divorce and separation reverberate through multigenerational families, requiring the renegotiation of relationships and a reorganization of family life (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Kemp, 2007; Lumby, 2010). Although a grandparent's role during divorce is somewhat ambivalent, Ong & Quah (2007) argue that a grandparent's contribution to a grandchild's welfare is significant and should be given legal consideration during the divorce process. Within divorced families, grandparents may find new opportunities to become part time caretakers and serve as a steady support system for grandchildren. Presumably, a trusted family member like a grandparent may fulfill a child's need for increased social, emotional and instrumental support during a divorce, establishing a foundation of closeness and trust during a time of conflict.

The experience of divorce is different for many families and although negatively stigmatized, does not necessarily cause the deterioration of a family unit. Doyle, O'Dywer, and Timonen (2010) contend that the actions taken by grandparents during divorce carry vastly important implications for grandparent-

parent relationships as well as grandparent-grandchild relationships. Though divorce may disjoint certain parts of a family, other branches of the family tree may become stronger in light of such an event; Kemp (2007) shows that marriage and divorce increases contact between grandchildren and their grandparents, particularly grandmothers. Similar results by Doyle, O'Dywer, and Timonen (2010) indicate that within post-divorce families, paternal grandparents do maintain significant relationships with grandchildren and with their children.

The probability for remarriage among divorced women is 54% (Center For Disease Control and Prevention, 2002). This statistic indicates that, although marriage may not be a permanent union for all couples, ending a marriage may bring opportunities for new relationships to develop and ultimately allow families to blend and grow in size. Especially within western culture, blended families are becoming a pervasive unit in the social landscape (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), which undoubtedly challenges traditional notions of the nuclear family and expanding greatly what it means to be a grandparent, or a step-grandparent.

### **Cohabitant, Custodial, and Long Distance Grandparents**

A grandparent's role is perhaps most drastically changed due to external circumstances leading them to become primary caregivers for their grandchildren. In this case, the grandparent role may shift to resemble and include the challenges of a parent role. In the absence of both parents, a grandparent may become the guardian of their grandchild, often resulting in permanent grandparent-grandchild cohabitation or adoption. Although a custodial grandparent takes on similar duties

as a parent, custodial grandparent relationships have been found to be quite unique (Tompkins, 2007) and require more in-depth exploration from a scholarly research perspective. This increasingly common living arrangement is influenced greatly by the age at birth of one's first child, race, geographic region, and socioeconomic status (Caputo, 2002 as cited in Kemp, 2007).

While there are certainly negative correlations to grandparent health, grandparents may have a positive impact on single-parent homes. Research by Mutchler and Baker (2009) found that children living in mother-only households that include a grandparent are far less likely to be living below or near the poverty level, compared with children living in mother-only families without a grandparent. Through 41 qualitative semi-structured interviews with adolescents raised by their grandparents, Dolbin-MacNab and Keiley (2009) found a wide range of positive outcomes of these unique grandparent-grandchild relationships including gratitude and respect, emotional bonds, and positive influences. The same study also worked to identify stressors experienced by grandchildren such as arguments and emotional distance, which are primarily associated with the generational gap between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren.

The health and well being of custodial grandparents is a topic that has yielded varying results through different research studies. Cross, Day, and Byers (2010) utilize qualitative interviews with 31 American Indian custodial grandparents to find many stressors including physical and emotional health challenges and rewards such as keeping the family together, are associated with grandparents caring for their grandchildren. Furthermore, Erbert and Aleman

(2008) argue that grandparents raising their grandchildren identify many dialectical contradictions associated with this living situation such as connection verses separation, stability verse change, and protection verses expression. The same study indicates the challenges and complexities associated with the integration of grandchildren into the social world of grandparents. Research by King, et al. (2009) indicates that grandparents caring for grandchildren also experience psychological challenges, social isolation, and marginalization as a result of grandparent-grandchild cohabitation. In addition to psychological burdens of caring for a grandchild, the physical health of grandparent caregivers is often compromised and may result in mismanagement of medications and further health complications (Kolomer, 2009). Neely-Barnes, Graff, and Washington (2010) found that the population of custodial grandparents contains subgroups that vary from good health related quality of life to a poor health related quality of life.

Although not all grandparents become full time caregivers, many choose to engage in their grandchildren's lives through part time complimentary childcare (Wheelock & Jones, 2002), which is often contingent upon grandparent health and geographic distance from a grandchild (Igel & Szydlik, 2011). Providing occasional childcare for a grandchild may serve as a bonding experience as well as provide support for working parents. According to Bernal and Anuncibay (2008) grandparents most often assume the role of a caregiver in response to parental needs rather than their own needs as grandparents. Growing numbers of dual-worker households allow grandparents to play a variety of roles

including part-time caregivers, playmates, advisors, financial supporters, and other functions as needed (Bjelde & Sanders, 2010; Attar-Schwartz, Tan, & Buchanan, 2009) Thus, the grandparenting role is becoming increasingly malleable in light of various family changes as well as societal changes.

While there is evidence that custodial grandparenting will become increasingly common in the near future it can be inferred by the increasing popularity of sun-belt retirement communities that many retired grandparents may become long distance upon migration to a retirement community. Relocating retirees are becoming an increasingly important part of sun-belt states, many of these retirees move to planned communities and with the baby boomer generation readily approaching retirement, the popularity of such communities is likely to grow significantly within the next few decades. There are now over 50 Del Webb communities in 20 states ranging from larger developments to small, intimate housing designed for residents over age 55 (Del Webb Corporation, 2012). These communities often provide activities and amenities that tailor to the needs of nearly retired individuals, as well as long-time retirees. In Arizona alone, more than 80,000 retirees live in three of the Sun City Communities (US Census Bureau, 2002 as cited in Waldron, Gitelson, Kelley, & Regalado, 2005).

There are many reasons for elders to relocate to an age-restricted living community including location, security, and joining friends (Bekhet, Zauszniewski, and Nakhala, 2009), however there are also many costs associated with relocating to a long distance retirement community including a potential deficit in social support (Waldron, Gitelson, Kelley, & Regalado, 2005). When



relocating to a retirement community over a significant geographic distance, longstanding relationships with family and friends may be disrupted (Waldron, Gitelson, & Kelly, 2005) thus, retirees may be faced with maintaining long distance relationships at a greater capacity than previous generations. In an examination of social support and depression among retirement community residents, Potts (1997) shows that social support from those living outside of the retirement community predicted low levels of depression among participants. It is clear through this research that despite the many amenities and social opportunities provided within retirement communities, residents may indeed deal with challenges and issues associated with being geographically distant from their families and close friends. Further research focused on the experiences of retired aging adults is necessary to improve the environmental design of these communities as well as the lives of their residents.

### **Turning Point Analysis**

This study uses a turning point framework to conceptualize the relational trajectories of long distance grandparent-grandchild relationships. A turning point refers to a transformative event in which the relationship is changed in some way (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Because turning point methodology is contingent upon natural changes that occur within relationships, this method lends itself to discovering the shifts within these relationships in order to identify the impact of these changes on relational closeness. According to Becker et al. (2009)

Turning point interviews afford participants the opportunity to consider and interpret the moments at which their relationships were significantly

altered (either positively or negatively), and to describe the context of these transformations. (p. 352)

Turning point research also reveals trends in relational closeness that are not easily accessed by other methods of inquiry.

Analyzing relationships based the identification of turning points allows for the realization of relational evolution, and evaluation of a relationship based on the increases and decreases in feelings of psychological closeness. Turning points vary greatly and can be symbolic, simplistic or grand in nature. The turning point hypothesis has been explored thoroughly by the academic community to understand many cultural and social phenomenon including criminal activity (Corman, Noonan, Reichman, & Schwartz-Solcher, 2011) obsessive relational intrusion (Mumm & Cupach, 2010) friendships (Becker et al., 2009) post divorce relationships (Graham, 1997) non-marital post-dissolutional relationships (Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Chen, 2008) parent-child relationships (Golish, 2000) blended family relationships (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999) and researcher-participant rapport (Pitts & Miller-Day, 2007). The turning point hypothesis provides a unique perspective that allows for the reexamination of relational changes and is a suitable methodology for the retrospective examination of the life course (Cappeliez, Beaupre, & Robitaille, 2008).

The present study is guided by previous scholarly literature that explores turning points within intergenerational family relationships with particular consideration for grandparents. Findings by Dun (2010) indicated a vast array of communicative turning points that occur between parents and grandparents upon

the birth of a grandchild (i.e. face-threatening actions, advice, conflict, and disclosures) allotting new insight into the fragile transition into the roles of a new parent and a new grandparent. Holladay et al. (1998) examine the relationships between grandparents and their granddaughters, revealing that multiple events positively impact relational closeness (e.g. participating in shared activities and decrease in geographic separation) and negatively impact relational closeness (e.g. transitioning into college and increase in geographic distance). These studies on grandparent-grandchild relationships indicate the potential complexity that exists within these relationships, providing a solid foundation for further intergenerational family-based turning point research.

### **Retrospective Interview Technique**

Turning points are often generated through Retrospective Interview Technique (RIT), in which informants are interviewed about each turning point and asked to graph those turning points on a grid (Huston, Surra, Fitzgerald, & Cate, 1981 as cited in Baxter & Pittman, 2001). Plotting relational stories on a grid allows both the participant and the researcher to gain a visual representation of a relationship. Such a methodology is important in gaining a valid understanding of relational events that help to shape the closeness of grandparents and their grandchildren and allows these events to be understood from a developmental perspective.

RIT is employed to generate an understanding of how relationships change over time. According to Montgomery and Duck (1993) data collected through RIT is used to examine different relational phenomenon and how interactions

among relational variables change over time. RIT relies on participant memory of relational histories and their ability to connect one relational story to the next in order to develop an overall understanding of the relationship from its conception to present day. RIT is a particularly interactive methodology that is suitable for building participant/researcher rapport. Thus, given the intimate character of family research, RIT seems appropriate, by nature, in order to establish a partnership between participant and researcher that may increase the reliability of results.

## Chapter 3

### RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

#### **Research Implications**

The aging adult population has steadily begun to rise and is expected to increase dramatically with the maturation of the notably large baby boom generation. According to the Center For Disease Control and Prevention (2003), the number of persons in the United States over age 80 is expected to increase from 9.3 million in 2000 to 19.5 million in 2030. The aging population is not only significant in the United States; worldwide, the Center For Disease Control and Prevention (2003) predicts the average lifespan to increase by about 10 years by 2050. Thus, increasing longevity has created the opportunity for more grandchildren to know their grandparents for longer periods of time than ever before (Bernal & Anuncibay, 2008; Kemp, 2007). About 56 million grandparents currently reside in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2006), it is expected that this number will only increase as families begin to grow in both size and age.

While many family communication scholars have begun to conduct research on these relationships, the existing body of research has several shortcomings that have inspired the design of the present study. First, scholars of various disciplines have predominantly examined grandparent-grandchild coresidence (e.g. Anft, 2009; Bernedo, Fuentes, & Fernandez, 2008; Jackson, 2011) and its implications on grandparent health (Kolomer, 2009) economic hardship (Mutchler & Baker, 2009) and service programs (King et al., 2009). Second, much of the current research on the grandparent experience only reflects

the relational perspective of a parent (Weston & Qu, 2009) or a grandchild during adulthood or young adulthood, (e.g. Davey, Savla, Janke, & Anderson, 2009; Dolbin-McNab & Kelley, 2009; Even-Zohar & Sharlin, 2009; Fowler & Soliz, 2010; Geurts, Poortman, van Tilburg, & Dykstra, 2009; Harwood, 2000 b; Holladay et al., 1998; Monserud, 2011; Shin, 2009; Trinder, 2009; Tompkins, 2007). The plethora of research available on grandparents and their adult grandchildren is a stark contrast to the literature that explores the relationships between grandparents and adolescent grandchildren. Because of the significant development that takes place during adolescents it may be interesting to examine how family relationships are affected by the various social, emotional, and physical changes that occur during adolescence.

While some existing research does explore a grandparent's perspective on their relationships with their grandchildren (e.g. Harwood & Lin, 2000), much of this research is quantitative in nature (e.g. Silverstein & Marengo, 2001; Van Diepen & Mulder, 2009) and does not provide a holistic understanding of this perspective. Nor does it integrate the richness of qualitative data into the body of grandparent research. Often, external variables are used to analyze the quality of grandparent-grandchild relationships including gender, lineage, parent-grandparent relationship, and geographic proximity (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, & Buchanan, 2009; Davey, Savla, Janke, & Anderson, 2009; Fingerman, 2004; Geurts, Poortman, Van Tillberg, & Dykstra, 2009; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Although existing literature adds to an understanding of grandparenting, very little research seeks to consider the internal dynamics of long distance

grandparent grandchild relationships (Harwood, 2000 a). This assumes that only close-distance relationships are worth examination and does not take into account the number of retirees who may migrate to retirement communities, placing them at a geographical distance from their families. In light of this oversight, this study focuses mainly on the internal aspects of these distanced intergenerational relationships, heard only from the voice of a grandparent, while also seeking an understanding specifically within the context of a long distance relationship between a grandparent and their adolescent grandchild.

Because turning points have strong implications for many different types of relationships, (Baxter & Erbert, 1999; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999) it is plausible that further insight into grandparent grandchild relationships can be generated by applying existing turning point framework to the population of long-distance grandparents. The current study builds upon research by Holladay et al. (1998) by systematically examining turning points in closeness between grandparents and grandchildren. It is suggested by Holladay et.al. that future research should be conducted to help explain qualitative differences of relational closeness between grandparents and their grandchildren. In light of this direct suggestion, discrepancies in existing literature, as well as the increasing cultural and social need for in depth aging research, this study deviates from the systematic design of previous research by analyzing data derived from qualitative, retrospective interviews with grandparents living geographically distant from their grandchildren.

The present study examines how turning points work to shape relational closeness between grandparents and their long distance adolescent grandchildren as well as identify what types of events are considered to be relationally significant by a grandparent. Utilizing RIT yields a greater understanding of the interpersonal history and relational trajectory between the participant and their grandchild and will contribute rich data to the existing body of grandparent-grandchild research.

Three research questions are explored for the purpose of expanding the body of scholarly literature surrounding intergenerational family relationships as well as build a foundation for future study of grandparent-grandchild relationships. First, in order to generate content for specific turning points considered significant by long-distance grandparents, it is necessary to identify these turning points utilizing the voice of grandparents.

**RQ1:** What types of relational events do grandparents most identify as turning points in their relationships with their long distance adolescent grandchild?

In order to examine how various turning points function to shape the relational trajectories of these intergenerational relationships, the quantitative changes in relational closeness must also be measured as an assessment of relational development. Exploration into the positive and negative shifts within these relationships may expose variability within these relationships in terms of closeness of grandparent-grandchild relationships.



**RQ2:** How are the turning points identified by participants associated with changes in psychological closeness to their adolescent grandchild?

It is of great importance to understand not only how individual turning points alter these relationships, but the relational trajectory of these relationships as they unfold. The experience of grandparenting is somewhat mysterious, thus, research that allows individuals to share their experiences may also be practical for future grandparents as they enter into this new role. As noted throughout the literature review section of this study, stereotypical beliefs about the stagnant nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships have yet to be firmly challenged through social science literature, thus, it is fitting that this study examine the nature of these relational trajectories. Because RIT as a methodology yields the benefit of a visual representation of relational change, Research Question 3 seeks to generate an understanding of the grandparent-grandchild relational trajectory.

**RQ3:** In what ways do grandparent-grandchild relationships change over time?

## Chapter 4

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through a collaboration with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, part of Arizona State University's Partnership for Community Development within the School of Community Resources and Development, College of Public Programs. At the time of the survey, all current participants of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Arizona State University were sent an email or provided handouts describing the study and eligibility for participation.

To qualify for participation, individuals had to presently have at least one grandchild between the ages of 12 and 19 years whom they consider to be long-distance. Previous research on long distance romantic relationship by Guldner and Swensen (1995) identifies long distance through the interpretation of participants, thus the present study conceptualizes distance at the discursion of the participant. Eligibility for participation required participants to agree with the following statement, adapted from Guldner and Swensen, in order to be eligible for participation: "At least one of my grandchildren lives far enough away from me that it would be very difficult or impossible to see them every day".

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-five (N= 35) participants; thirty interviews were conducted in the homes of participants while five interviews were conducted at coffee shops or on Arizona State University's West Campus. Due to technical difficulties (i.e. voice recorder

malfunction or inaudible interviews) five interviews were unable to be transcribed and were eliminated from the sample, therefore, thirty interviews were utilized in the final analysis (N=30). A total of thirty participants seemed to be appropriate for this exploratory study because of the thematic saturation that was achieved towards the last few participant interviews. Once it was recognized that interview themes were repeated several times, the data collection process was stopped and no more interviews were conducted. In an effort to ensure both anonymity and accuracy of the data, no family members were recruited to participate, which might have biased results. All participants agreed to be interviewed for a study involving relationships between grandparents and grandchildren.

The age of participant ranged from 60-82 years of age ( $M = 70.9$ ,  $SD = 5.34$ ). Participants identified turning points with their adolescent grandchildren between the ages of 12 and 19 ( $M = 14.7$ ,  $SD = 2.36$ ). Nearly all participants self identified their race as Caucasian, while one participant identified their race as Hispanic. All participants lived independent of professional caregivers; three participants lived either part time or full time in a retirement community in Arizona while seven participants lived in homes outside of retirement communities. Twenty-one participants were female ( $N = 21$ ) and nine participants were male ( $N = 9$ ).

## **Procedures**

Participants received a thorough explanation of the purpose and methods of the study before the interview process began. Each participant completed a consent form. In accordance with IRB protocol, participants were allowed to

discontinue participation at any time. Both written and oral consent were obtained prior to recording interviews. Anonymity was ensured through assignment of a participant identification number that was used to identify participants throughout the analysis stage of this study. Participant identification numbers included the chronologic interview number and gender of the participant (i.e. 1F, 1M, 2M, 2F etc.). Before the interview process began, participants completed a brief demographic survey indicating their race, age, gender, and approximate distance (in miles) from their grandchild.

Upon full disclosure of the research purpose, participants' relationships with their grandchildren were casually discussed; this served to establish rapport, allowing participants to discuss their relationships with their grandchildren, and purposefully reflect on these relationships. Because interviews primarily took place in the homes of participants, the naturalistic setting assured the comfort of participants, which served as an ethical priority especially given the highly personal nature of the subject matter. The qualitative interviews were semi-structured in order to increase participation and allow for participant-guided conversation and ease of disclosure. Participants readily identified their overall feelings towards their grandchildren, which prefaced later, more specific information. The term 'closeness' was isolated and discussed at great length. Consistent with Golish (2000), closeness was defined as the psychological bond that a grandparent feels towards their grandchild. Once it was evident that participants understood the criteria for identifying relational closeness, the topic shifted to discussing turning points and changes in relational closeness. In order to

increase the quality of measurement, participants were educated on the theoretical concept of relational turning points. Participants were also given several examples of turning points cited from previous research studies (e.g. Hollaway et al., 1998). By defining these terms with clear and precise language and providing examples, participants were able to think about their relationships in terms that correlate to the purpose of the research study. This also ensured that participants were able to organize their thoughts in a specific structure necessary for the following component of the interview.

Next, participants were asked to select one of their long-distance grandchildren between the ages of 12 and 19 to discuss during the interview. Participants with multiple grandchildren were encouraged to select a grandchild at random. During this time, participants readily volunteered brief background information on the selected grandchild, which included basic demographic information such as age, gender, and their geographic location. Participants were then presented with a RIT graph of relational closeness that included the level of closeness on the y-axis and the age of the child on the x-axis. Participants ranked their level of emotional closeness on the y-axis to their grandchild utilizing a 5-point Likert scale (one indicated the least amount of closeness and five indicated the greatest amount of closeness). Participants were asked to plot their retrospective levels of relational closeness to a particular grandchild beginning at age five until the grandchild's present age. Throughout this process, participants and were encouraged to plot as many or as few points as they saw fit.

Beginning the study of relational closeness at age five was justified not only by similar retrospective research (Golish 2000) but also by Piaget's theory of the preoperational stage of cognitive development. At the preoperational stage, which occurs around age five, a child produces mental abilities that are essential to relational development (Miller & Church, 2003). Participants often explained briefly the context behind the relational trajectory as they completed the graph, however, this information was explored in-depth during the next segment of the interview process. After the graph was complete, it was positioned in front of the interviewee in order to serve as a constant visual that would inform the following component of the interview. Following the general discussion of relational closeness to their grandchild and plotting turning points on the relational graph, the interview transitioned into participants discussing in detail each turning point that occurred within the relationship. The graph served as a useful visual for the purpose of probing participants for more information throughout the interview process. Participants were also able to make changes to the graph at any time.

Because of the extensive discussion concerning relational change, participants were prepared to divulge details of these relationships, systematically identify turning points, and establish the context for each turning point. Participants were probed for further information regarding each turning point through the use of various open-ended questions. Often, participants elaborated on circumstances surrounding the turning points, revealing intimate family details that contributed to a greater understanding of the family dynamics of each participant. Interviews were often emotional in nature; however none of the

participants chose to withdraw from participation, despite discussion of very personal, often uncomfortable, disappointing, or tragic relational events.

Participants were also encouraged to share as much information concerning these relationships as they felt necessary for the purpose of the research study, many offered further details into their role within the family, their experiences as grandparents, and their experiences as parents, resulting in interviews ranging from approximately 7 minutes to 45 minutes in length.

Immediately after each interview took place, interview recordings were transcribed by listening to short segments of the recording, pausing the recording, then typing the segment into a word document. While the initial transcription included verbal utterances, a second transcription of each interview was conducted in order to include pauses, subtle utterances, and other nonverbal communication (e.g. laughing, crying), which was gathered by listening to interview recordings a second time. This step also served to ensure accuracy of the interview transcription capture the atmosphere of the interview, and account for the emotional tone of each participant. Throughout the transcription process, each turning point was identified by either a positive (+) sign or a negative (-) sign to clearly indicate how the relational event impacted the participant's feelings of closeness. This additional step was taken in the transcription process to ensure the impact of each turning point was not lost in the transcription process. The interview transcription yielded 58 pages of single-spaced text utilized during the data analysis stage of this study.

After all interviews were complete, each of the thirty hand-drawn RIT graphs was converted to individual electronic graphs through SPSS programming. The RIT graphs facilitated visual comparison of the relational trajectories, as required by Research Questions 2 and 3. These graphs are reported in Figures 1.0-5.1.

### **Data Analysis**

This study employs Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method for qualitative analysis to generate distinct categories of turning points and relational trajectories. Open coding was used to accurately break down the data and allow for categories to readily emerge (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In preparation for coding, RIT graphs were crosschecked in conjunction with respondent interviews in order to ensure accuracy of the graph trajectories. In order to develop and identify themes of turning points, each turning point was compared with the previous turning points in the same category until cohesiveness was achieved within each category. The same procedure was followed for coding the RIT graphs into categories of relational trajectories. Next, the task of integrating categories and their properties was completed in order to highlight the similarities and the differences between each category generated by both turning points and RIT graphs. Thus, categories become integrated into overarching relational themes yet remained distinctive enough to showcase the diversity of such themes when analyzed as a whole. Categories were developed and reexamined throughout the analysis stage. Axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was utilized when a turning point was ambiguous in terms of what



category it belonged to; the turning point was analyzed in the context of the entire interview in order to correctly categorize the overall theme of the particular turning point. Axial coding was also utilized in the analysis of RIT graphs when the graph trajectory was similar to more than one category. In this case, interviews were analyzed in conjunction with the participant RIT graph in order to establish the tone of the relationship and determine the impact of these turning points on the overall grandparent-grandchild bond.

## Chapter 5

### RESULTS

#### **Research Questions 1 and 2: Turning Points and Relational Impact**

In order to answer Research Question 1, a total of 99 unique turning points were identified (see Table 1). The number of turning points identified per participant ranged from 0-10 ( $M = 3.38$ ,  $SD = 2.38$ ). A total of eight categories of turning points were identified including *Spending Time Together*, *Use of Technology*, *Relational Investment*, *Geographic Distance*, *Lack of Relational Investment*, *Lack of Free Time*, *Family Relational Dynamics* and *Grandchild Gaining Independence*. Eight participants indicated that they had not experienced any turning points in their relationship with their grandchild. The context of each turning point was analyzed in conjunction with the RIT graph in order to answer Research Question 2 and identify the positive and negative influence of each turning point category (see Table 1). While some categories of turning points were found to be unanimously numerically positive (i.e. *Spending Time Together*, *Use of Technology*, and *Relational Investment*) or negative (i.e. *Geographic Distance*, *Lack of Relational Investment*, and *Lack of Free Time*) other categories, such as *Family Relational Dynamics* and *Grandchild Gaining Independence* display different interpretations of these turning points as both positive and negative. The following section will discuss these answers to research questions one and two in greater detail.

Table 1:

*Definitions of Turning Point Categories, Frequency, and Impact on Relational Closeness*

Turning Point	Frequency	Positive	Negative	Definition
<i>Spending time together</i>	22	22	0	Face-to-face interaction with a grandchild.
<i>Family Relational Dynamics</i>	17	5	12	Divorce, abuse, conflict with parents, conflict with in-laws, cohabitation, discipline.
<i>Geographic Distance</i>	12	0	12	Significant geographic distance as a result of moving or family location.
<i>Lack of Relational Investment</i>	12	0	12	Lack of effort to cultivate or sustain closeness.
<i>Use of Technology</i>	11	11	0	Adopting technology as a means of communication.
<i>Relational Investment</i>	11	11	0	Relational adaptations initiating a qualitative shift in closeness.
<i>Lack of Free Time</i>	8	0	8	Inability to spend time together because of busy schedules and activities.
<i>Grandchild Gaining Independence</i>	7	1	6	Grandchild reaching puberty, maturing, and/or developing into a young adult.
Total	99	50	49	

## Spending Time Together

The most cited and unanimously positive turning point was *Spending Time Together*, which primarily included instances of face-to-face interaction with a grandchild, visits, family vacations, or holiday gatherings. The driving force behind the increase in closeness in this category is undoubtedly the quality of one-on-one interaction between a participant and their grandchild, as one participant describes spending time with her 15-year-old granddaughter:

It's starting to come up now (the level of closeness) because like I said, she comes down here the last three years, and she comes down here once a year, just alone, so she has a terrific time just for her and no peripheral involvement with other family members.

The ability to interact with a grandchild without other family members also proved to be valuable among other participants who have multiple grandchildren "We have something called *Camp Grammie Grampie*... but we would take each one of them for a few days and we just concentrate and do things with that one child."

Other participants also identified this quality time as a symbol of trust from their children and a sense of being a part of a larger family unit. One participant implies that spending time with her 15-year-old grandson during his childhood allowed her to feel closer to other family members as well as her grandson:

One turning point was that he'd come to my house and they'd bring him over and mom and dad would go on a trip and I'd stay at the house or

mom and dad would go out, we spent more time together, and time together was the factor that made us closer.

Overall, this was identified as the most precious and important factor in grandparent's feelings of relational closeness with their grandchild, guided not by the quantity of visits, but by the quality of those interactions. Some of the participants describe their relationship as more of a friendship, as one participant describes spending time with her 17-year-old granddaughter "And we do massages and we go to the pool and we sit up late and drink wine and talk, and, um, I'm showing her her baby pictures now so our relationship is getting much better." Another participant describes a similar interaction with her 15-year-old grandson:

So when he comes down here... we have our places, Chipotle, Bookman's, Best Buy, and he likes to watch movies on T.V. and he has Netflix so he will say 'oh grandma you have to see this movie!' so anyways, that's where we are at, and the girls (granddaughters) are the same way, and they drive, and their boyfriends will come and spend the night or the weekend, so yeah, it's good.

These particular examples illustrate how spending time together can establish a comfortable relationship or shift traditional relational dynamics of grandparent-grandchild connections to more of a friendship relationship. The particular strength of this category works to exemplify how these dyads can be strengthened when isolated from the family as a whole; however the second most common

category generated from this analysis exemplifies how these relationships may be contingent upon the family in which they are embedded.

### **Family Relational Dynamics**

*Family Relational Dynamics* served as a diverse category containing both positive and negative changes in relational closeness. This category includes many instances of family conflict, and unexpected shifts within the family that ultimately impact the grandparent-grandchild relationship. The strength of this category signifies that there is indeed more to building and depleting these relationships than simply the two individuals within them. Although the majority of these instances decreased relational closeness (N=12), some family-oriented issues worked to bring participants closer to their grandchild. As one participant explains, the abuse of his 15-year-old granddaughter shifted their relationship in a positive way

I think looking back at it, there are a couple of things, a series of unfortunate circumstances, our granddaughter, among other things, was being abused emotionally by her father, uh, and needed protection and that was from the time she was a baby, on some kind of nutty level, even as a baby, so that was followed by a close period of helping her deal with and discover that her father was a son of a bitch... sick...sick... crazy.

Mentally sick.

For this participant, the abuse of his granddaughter shifted from the traditional role of being a grandfather to ultimately becoming a protector of his family.

Through this defense, he was able to serve as a trusted adult for his

granddaughter, which strengthened their relationship. Helping his granddaughter cope with the abuse that she suffered as a young child allowed for healing after a particularly traumatic family ordeal that could have very easily shifted their relational closeness in the opposite way.

Another family-embedded circumstance that fell into this category is that of cohabitation. One participant spoke about living with her two now teenage grandchildren as a positive aspect of their relationship

We all had a place together and it was grandma, two daughters, two grandchildren, little, little. So that was the family, it was a blast, it really really was a blast, and for me especially because I enjoyed them so much at that age.

In contrast to this participant's fond memories of living with her grandchildren, another participant acknowledged that living with her now 18-year-old granddaughter was not a positive foundation for their relationship and that the consequences have impacted their current relational closeness

When she was 5 or just about 5, her parents split up, and for various reasons my daughter and granddaughter left Alabama and moved to Chicago where we were and they moved in with us...they stayed for about 7 or 8 months...and I enjoyed those times with my granddaughter very much and I had hoped it would be a bonding experience, but I also found, in retrospect, I became the disciplinarian because my daughter wasn't there... so I took over that role when maybe I shouldn't have, and maybe I was too strong of a disciplinarian, but there became problems developing

between my granddaughter and myself and she is very stubborn and willful herself so by the time those 8 months were over, there was a lot of tension and stress between the three of us.

Throughout the data collection process, divorce manifested as a common family event that influenced the grandparent grandchild relationship. Divorce proved to be quite an ambiguous event in the eyes of grandparents, shifting not only their relationships with their grandchildren, but with the entire family. Some participants found that the ramifications of a divorce were particularly negative, as in the case of one participant who explained how her son's divorce impacted her relationship with her 16-year-old granddaughter:

The big turning point in our relationship was when her father divorced her mother, and that's when I really was, I really felt cut off from the girls, um, I would see them occasionally, but I never really knew just exactly where I stood...I always felt like we had a good relationship before that and I don't know how bitter my former daughter in law is, she seemed to be quite bitter about it and seems to involve the kids in it and I don't think that's a healthy way.

In this instance, the conflict that arose as a result of the divorce clearly has impacted the grandmother's ability to readily interact with the family; therefore the decrease in closeness is perhaps inevitable in this situation and is not helped by conflict with x- in-laws

Although there certainly may be conflicts surrounding divorce, not all participants indicated that divorce decreased their closeness to their grandchild, in



fact, for some participants, a divorce served as a positive relational shift. One grandmother describes her 13-year-old granddaughter's reaction to the conflict that followed her parent's divorce:

She just had to flat out say we had to reach an agreement that we would not say anything against her father anymore and that she could say anything she wanted to about her situation and that we would hold that confidence and not share it with her mother or anyone else, so that opened up some communication.

Thus, a seemingly negative family event has opened up opportunities for new lines of communication for this particular relationship, allowing for the establishment of a safe conversational space where the grandchild was able to feel comfortable and open.

### **Geographic Distance**

The next category, *Geographic Distance*, was cited quite often (N=12) and was unanimously considered to be a negative turning point for participants. For many grandparents, an increase in geographic distance such as a grandchild moving, or a grandparent relocating after retirement took a dramatic toll on the relationship. One participant indicates that her bond with her 16-year-old granddaughter has weakened as a result of moving:

Let's see, the waning of the closeness was not any fault of the parent or the relationship, but rather the fact that she always lived in the same town until she was 6 and through divorce she moved to the eastern part of the

states so I didn't get to see her as much...so we are close, just not as close as we would have been if we had been in the same town.

Another participant articulates a similar experience with her 15-year-old grandson:

But as they moved a further distance away, I got busier, both of his parents were working so we just lost some of that real closeness...but I feel like we have a connection, but it's not the same physical connection that we had, it's very loving, just not as frequent.

Other participants expressed a more severe depletion of closeness after an increase in geographic distance, as one participant explains her closeness to her 12-year-old granddaughter:

I don't feel as if I'm close at all. I'm just like a distant person. So it happened when they moved, so, and she's 12, she's in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, she moved there in 4<sup>th</sup> grade so it started 3 years ago.

As is evident by this participant's description of her psychological feelings towards her granddaughter, physical distance can indeed take a toll on these relationships.

Other participants who indicated distance as a negative relational turning point indicated that it was not necessarily an event of a family relocating, rather, the symbolic nature that that distance has on their relationship. "It's a 3 (closeness) only because of the distance." One participant describes his relationship with his 15-year-old grandson who has always lived in a different state. Another grandfather indicates that the geographic distance between he and

his 12-year-old granddaughter has deterred him from cultivating an involved relationship with her:

Unfortunately, because of the distance, it's like Kodak moments. We see each other rarely face to face. It's snap shots. We get to see her maybe once or twice a year, and every time we see her, it's the beginning of a new relationship, it's starting all over again, and I'm thrilled with some of the development that I see, but I am disappointed that I have very little to do with it.

Another participant indicated that no particular tangible event caused the distance of her 16-year-old grandson to be a turning point, rather the distance itself worked to change their relationship "Well, I suppose it (closeness) does diminish over time, just because now he's distant." It is interesting to note that some participants acknowledge these turning points to be more symbolic in nature than others, particularly pertaining to being physically distant from their grandchild and other family members.

### **Lack of Relational Investment**

The next category, *Lack of Relational Investment*, was also cited frequently (N=12) as a significant negative turning point in these grandparent-grandchild relationships. Particularly for long distance relationships, there is a significant amount of relational maintenance that must take place in order to sustain relational closeness. Many participants indicated that the investment they were making in order to strengthen these relationships was not being made by their grandchild or by other family members. One participant illustrates this

conundrum as he describes his frustration with his 19-year-old granddaughters lack of interest in their relationship:

We go for the holidays, we go to see them a little, but even then, we'll come for thanksgiving, she'll have dinner with us and then she'll say 'I gotta go meet my friends'. Well, your grandparents just drove 400 miles, we haven't seen you since whenever, would it be so wrong for us to expect that you could stay for a little bit longer after dinner and inquire about our life?

The same participant describes the impact that this pattern of indifference has on his views of the relationship as a whole:

So I don't know if it's disappointment, or if it's anger, but you find there is a certain upset that you feel, there's like a disenfranchisement, which may be more mental than real, and the relationship begins to feel too one sided, the effort seems to be one sided.

This participant's feelings are echoed throughout the turning points within this category, like a grandmother of an 18-year-old granddaughter who shares a similar frustration:

But there's no connection between us anymore, I have visited them many times and she's either with her friends or drawing a picture or playing with one of her electronic toys, she doesn't seem to want to spend time talking, she doesn't seem interested in me or my life...she doesn't want to come back here, she has no interest in returning to Arizona, which means that the only time I am going to see her is when I go to her, and I am getting

older, and plane tickets are expensive, and I don't know how many more visits I will be able to make to visit her.

The lack of relational investment that participants see in their grandchildren was also indicated to occur at a more superficial level, as one participant lightheartedly spoke about her 16-year-old grandson texting while they were together "And the texting! I mean, when he comes over, sometimes he's in his own world (laughs)." Another participant recalls how something as simple as discontinuing a phone date with her 13-year-old granddaughter lessened the quality of their relationship:

I would have a Saturday morning phone date with her every week, and we'd call and talk on the phone about what books she was reading and what things she was doing and then it just kind of faded away as she got a little bit older, she started sleeping in in the morning so we couldn't call at 8:00 in the morning, you know, on Saturday morning like we always did.

Another grandmother recalled realizing that her 13-year-old granddaughter was uninterested in speaking with her over the phone:

I was rather pleased, because I got a phone call...I got a phone call (from her granddaughter) and I said 'Hi! What's on your mind?' and she said 'You called me.' And I said 'No, I got a message' and she said 'Oh no, it was a butt call' and *click*. So I was quite pleased to get a phone call, (I was thinking) maybe she wants a relationship or maybe she wants to tell me that she got the package I sent her, but no, it was a butt call.

While it is clear through the words of these participants, some grandparents may feel that a grandchild has a responsibility to the grandparent-grandchild relationship, whereas other participants indicated that they themselves may be partially to blame for the lack of relational closeness. An example of this is found in the following participant who discusses the lack of closeness he feels towards his 12-year-old granddaughter:

We barely speak, I did not cultivate a telephone relationship with her and that's my fault because it's not anything for her to do...but I don't particularly go out of my way to cultivate a long distanced talking relationship with her.

### **Use of Technology**

The next category, *Use of Technology*, exemplifies the role that modern forms of communication may play in strengthening these relationships. This category (N=11) was dominantly positive, and shows the potential impact that emerging forms of technology may have on these long distance relationships. This category focuses primarily on the medium of communication, not the quality of this communication, however in hearing participants speak about how different forms of technology have enriched their relationships with their grandchildren and allowed for a greater degree of intimacy. As one grandfather discusses his close relationship to his 15-year-old granddaughter, he indicates that texting has become an important part of their relationship:

Technology is one (thing that has sustained our closeness). My granddaughter currently has a cell phone so she is able to use her phone to call and she is able to use her phone to text and I can text back.”

Another participant recalls how her relationship with her 17-year-old granddaughter opened up as a result of text-messaging “And she said ‘grandma, do you text?’ and I said ‘yes, let’s text!’ cause her other cousins only text, and now it’s, we’re almost where we were (in terms of closeness).”

This category also includes the use of social media, which seemed to predominantly serve as a way for grandparents to feel more connected to their grandchildren. A grandmother spoke of how her relationship with her 13-year-old granddaughter (and 14-year-old granddaughter) has been enriched since becoming ‘Friends’ on Facebook

You know, it’s so much fun for me, and what I do, I usually keep my mouth shut, they know I’m there and so far they’re still comfortable with it and you know, I never interfere with their relationships with their friends or anything, but it’s so fun to see things they do, and I mean if I got on the phone with them and tried to have them tell me some of the things they do, it wouldn’t happen.

Other grandparents indicated that Skype played a similar role as Facebook in allowing them to get to know their distant grandchildren and learn about them as individuals. A participant shared one example of using Skype to re-connect with her 13-year-old granddaughter:

One Saturday, I was on the computer and we chatted and I said ‘oh it’s really too bad that you don’t have a Skype account because then we could talk rather than be doing this typing’ and basically what she did was, well I hadn’t seen her for 8 months, 7 months maybe, and she just put the computer on her bed and I said ‘oh that looks like a new poster on your wall’ and so we kind of did this little virtual tour of her room and it was just like she and I were hanging out, no one else in the house even knew we were talking, her door was shut to her room. I was there on the computer, and it was really cool.

It is evident by this participant’s online interaction with her granddaughter that their relational quality seemed to increase as a result of a mutual use of technology.

### **Relational Investment**

The following category, *Relational Investment*, proved to be an incredibly significant and positive turning point for many participants (N=11) and is used to describe a grandchild or a grandparent making an effort to sustain the closeness within the relationship. This category includes instances of a grandchild or grandparent initiating some sort of contact or making effort to maintain the relational closeness. Overall, the turning points included in this category worked to shift the relationship in a positive manner, like one participant who describes how he ‘keeps up’ with his 17 year old grand son

My technique for staying in touch with them is to find their hot button, so my grandson likes tennis and when Rodger Cutter was playing Rafael



Nadal, I was texting him about who was gonna win and he was watching it.

This participant's active investment in his grandson's interests is one indicator that that their relationship is actively maintained, the extra effort made by this grandfather allows for common interests to be shared.

Another example of a tangible relational investment came from a participant who spoke of the importance of helping his 12-year-old grandson with his homework:

My grandson, he's 12. He is still into the legos an killing games, you know x box, and that stuff, so I'm not big into that but he has, in the past year, he has figured out that his grandfather has some worth and his grandfather's not as dumb as he thought he was. When it comes to helping him with homework, grandpa does a pretty good job at it so we get along, you know his dad helps him, but he's said things like 'you explain things differently than dad' and I'll say 'not better, just differently' ... I'd say with him it was in the last year or so when I've been able to help him with his homework we've become closer.

Certainly, this relationship is enriched by the effort this grandfather puts into helping his grandson, not necessarily by the literal assistance he provides, rather, by the effort to establish an activity that he and his grandson can do together. While there may not be a plethora of activities that a grandparent and a 12-year-old may equally enjoy, the importance of actively working to establish

some sort of joint activity or interest is displayed by this participant's experience with his grandson.

Participants also identified more symbolic forms of relational investment, as one participant describes the rather simplistic relational investment that she makes in order to maintain an open relationship with her distant 15-year-old grandson, where the relational investment is perhaps more subtle, and comes by way of active listening and support:

But we did spend a lot of time talking just about, what they believe about things and, um, you know, like social things, political things, cultural things and I look at the stuff that he's saying. All of the kids his age are all into conspiracy theories (laughs) and they are pretty much convinced that this is the way it is (laughs) But I also remember my interest in things that don't ordinarily meet the eye and where I really wanted to look into that stuff too. Maybe not as young as he did, but I make it a point not to argue about those things... because, just respecting his journey, that's what I try to do. And I will say 'yes I'm familiar with this idea, I looked into that too' and I don't say anything because I think that too, I don't want it to be an intergenerational argument and I don't think that I should say 'well you know, I've been around longer and I know more' it's more like 'let's see what it is that you learn and explore' and I kind of like it... but I respect theirs and they respect mine.

This category also included relational investments made by a grandchild, as one participant recalls her 16-year-old grandson reaching out to her and making a point to include her in various aspects of his life:

In about 5<sup>th</sup> grade, he would call and chat when he was lonely and tell me what was going on in school and stuff, and that's just kind of carried on and I know everyone of his teachers and his friends and now that's leveled off somewhat... but I get a call once a week.

The simple act of this participant's grandson calling and telling her about his school or activities is symbolic of an effort necessary for relational maintenance. While this participant found her grandson's phone calls to be particularly meaningful, the next participant articulates how she realized the quality of her relationship with her 16-year-old granddaughter:

It was really funny, last year I had this little speech to tell them, you know how kids are on the cell phones and texting all the time, and I thought, I'm not gonna have them come down here and have that phone and they're not gonna text all the time when they're with me because I need to spend this time with them, and I had this speech all figured out to give them, and I didn't have to give it! When they went to bed at night they took their phone with them, and that was it, they did not text during the day, if the phone rang, and it was their mother they answered it, and I didn't have to say anything! And I thought, oh my gosh (laughs) how special am I?

In this scenario, what may seem like common courtesy has actually served as a significant relational investment and shows a granddaughter's commitment to quality time with her grandmother.

Quality of a relationship may also be enhanced in a more direct manner, as one participant indicated as she talks about rekindling a relationship with her 17-year-old granddaughter:

It was really hard, like between 10 and 12 you know, and we just started talking one day up in Colorado, just the two of us in the yard of our cousin's house, just talking and she said she wanted to come down, so she came down here with her mom and her mom and grandpa went to an air show, and I said 'I am not going to Luke (Air Force Base)' so she and I went to the pool, and do you know she said 'Grandma do you know this is the first time I've ever been alone with you since I was a little girl' and I had never even thought about it, and obviously she had, and I said, 'let's not let this happen again' and that was 4 years ago and after that for the last three years she has just come down by herself, which has been good.

This category displays an interesting combination of relational maintenance from both grandchildren and grandparents. In contrast to the category *Lack of Relational Investment*, this category displays an active assortment of ways to put forth effort that may improve the quality of grandparent-grandchild relationships. These efforts may be more tangible in nature, such as offering to drive a grandchild to school or keeping up with their interests, or more simplistic,

as we see with examples of grandchildren initiating a more in-depth relationship with their grandparent.

### **Lack of Free Time**

Next, the category of *Lack of Free Time* (N=8) reflects a negative turning point for the participant's relationships with their grandchildren. This category displays how family relationships may suffer as a result of the busy schedules and activities that adolescents may participate in. A grandfather describes the trajectory of his relationship with his 19-year-old granddaughter and other family members as a result of busy schedules:

I think that closeness prevailed until she was about, oh, intensely involved in dance, and I mean intensely, and when she got into junior high, the combination of those two things, started eroding her free time... but my son is very much like his daughter, he worked till all hours in his office and he needed the weekend to have time with his children. So there wasn't always a lot of time for the four of us to spend together.

Another participant describes his waning interest in making an effort to see his 15-year-old grandson as being directly related to the lack of time that his grandson has to spend with his grandparents:

But they're so involved with neighbor kids, and school, and other activities that um there isn't the time or the inclination to sit down and just have a little heart to heart chat, and I suppose that because they don't show it, we don't make as much effort, that's unfortunate in retrospect to realize that if we had made more of an effort they may have had more interest in

talking to us, so it's evolved along that line, we were more interested in them at a younger age, and they weren't quite so involved, but as they've grown older, they become so involved with their friends and outside activities that we're almost invisible I would say.

This particular participant's experience with his grandchild has indeed stunted the relational growth between he and his grandson, bringing to light a rather subconscious side effect of overactive adolescents. It is evident through the use of the term 'invisible' that this participant sees his grandsons activities as taking priority over their grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Despite indicating a decrease in closeness, some participants were more accepting of the lack of free time that their grandchildren seemed to have. One such instance comes from a participant who spoke quite positively of her granddaughter's work ethic, despite feeling somewhat disconnected as a result of her busy schedule:

Then as she got to be a teenager (participant points to decreasing line on RIT graph) and got to be more active in school, and doing more and more things, right now she's in an all girls catholic school, she's not catholic (laughs) and it's uh a super academic you know their placement rate for scholarships is just about 90% so she's working really hard, she's always done really well in school.

Another participant acknowledges that while her 16-year-old granddaughter is indeed quite busy, she too has limited free time, and accepts that they may not always get to see each other as a result of both their busy schedules:

I would say I drew the line as I did because my pattern of life here- very active and her school life- very active, the contact isn't as frequent as I would like, but I think that's just the nature of the age of which she becomes, where softball and band practice and social events take priority over the contacts.

The turning points that make up this category reflect a variation of acceptance and adaptability and ultimately reflects the individual personalities that are at play within these relationship.

### **Grandchild Gaining Independence**

The final category, *Grandchild Gaining Independence* (N=7) was found to be a factor that primarily decreased grandparent's perceptions of relational closeness. Many participants spoke of entering high school or college to be significant milestones in the lives of their grandchildren, however, the turning points identified by participants in this category seem to be more associated with *wanting* to establish independence. Participants often describe entering teenage years to be the beginning of a lower quality relationship, as one grandmother does when discussing her 15-year-old- granddaughter "I would say first, probably becoming a teenager, and all the things that go along with that, wanting privacy and not thinking that your grandmother is so great anymore." Another participant indicated that once her 16-year-old granddaughter became a teenager, she expected and found that their relationship began to decrease in closeness "I would say, she used to come always in the summer, not coming to visit as much because teenagers like to be with their peers and not with grownups as much."

One grandfather describes watching his 13-year-old granddaughter go through early stages of puberty and struggling to understand her “As the older she got, her mood changed dramatically.” Another grandmother expresses a similar dissonance that she experienced with her 14-year-old granddaughter “So, anyways, she went through a pre-puberty thing where there was just not any way to communicate with her and she was so quiet and withdrawn and shed burst into tears at some strange little thing.” These participants display some of the trepidation associated with the rather fragile time in an adolescent’s life wherein their grandchildren transition from one developmental stage to the next.

While the majority of turning points in this category are identified as negative, and somewhat dramatic, one participant did indicate that her 17-year-old granddaughter ‘growing up’ brought them closer through unique circumstances and allowed for this participant to be an advocate for her granddaughter as she developed into a young woman:

For her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, I talked her mother into getting her on birth control pills, and she called me up and said ‘thank you, thank you grandma!’ because it’s just a fact of life and she knows that I was responsible because she knows we have talked about it before, and I feel good about that, and so does she, she feels really good about it. We have, all three of those girls (granddaughters), we have that conversation, and you know we talk about everything from sex to college to her latest car problem.

This particular instance of a grandchild gaining independence and taking opportunities to make responsible decisions was quite special because of her



grandmother's open and active involvement. Unlike other participants who indicated feeling somewhat unwanted or shut out from their grandchildren, during this time, this grandmother chose to provide input during this important point in her granddaughter's development.

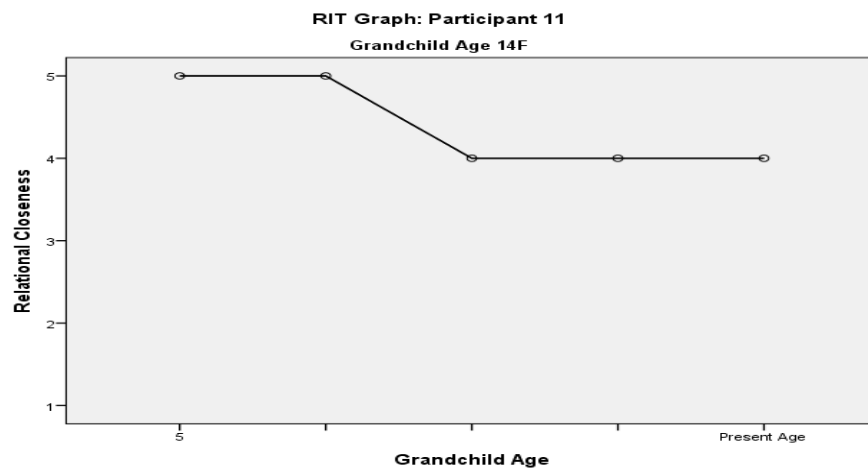
### **Research Question 3: Relational Trajectories**

In addition to understanding what types of relational events work to change the grandparent grandchild relationship, Research Question 3 of this study sought to understand patterns of change, if any, that exist within these relationships. Analysis of the relational trajectories identified by participants lends a new perspective of the malleability of the grandparent grandchild relationship, furthermore, the visual results of the RIT graphs proved to be a clear indication of the different trajectories that these relationships may follow, displaying a unique combination of variety and cohesiveness. When analyzed and compared together, the graphs displayed five general trajectories *Decrease in Relational Closeness* (N=10), *Consistent Relational Closeness* (N=8), *Minimal Changes in Closeness* (N=5), *Multidimensional Changes in Closeness* (N=5), *Increase in Relational Closeness* (N=2). The results are best understood if visually analyzed and indicate an incredibly diversity within and between these categories.

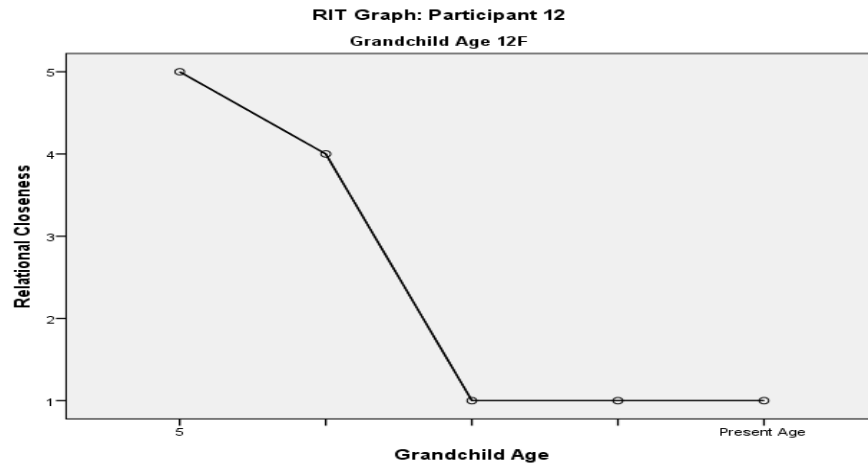
#### **Decrease in Closeness**

Figures 1.0-1.10 display the individual participant RIT graphs that identify grandparent's relational trajectories with their grandchild that decreased in relational closeness over time. This relational trend was the most frequently cited by participants (N=10) throughout the study. Participants who indicated this

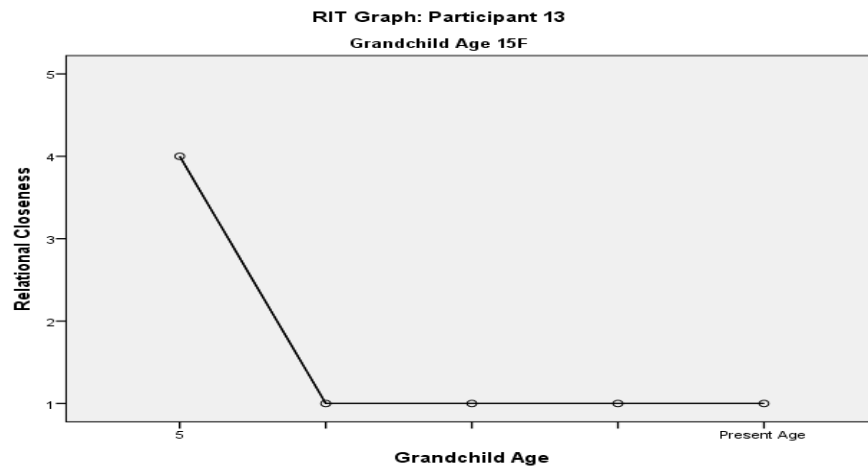
relational trend during the interview process generally spoke of their early closeness with their grandchild as high ( $M=4.5$ ;  $SD= .49$ ) while their level of closeness at the grandchild's present age is relatively low ( $M= 1.5$ ;  $SD= 1.0$ ). The grandchild age is relatively consistent ( $M = 15.8$ ;  $SD = 1.9$ ) as is the grandchild gender; most of the grandchildren are female ( $N=9$ ) and only one male ( $N=1$ ). The graphs within this category display both a gradual (see Figure 1.0.) and dramatic (see Figure 1.1.) decreases in relational closeness indicating that the relational trajectories may indeed shift at different rates. Some of the graphs within this category are nearly identical (see Figures 1.4,1.6, & 1.8) although the age of the grandchild differs.



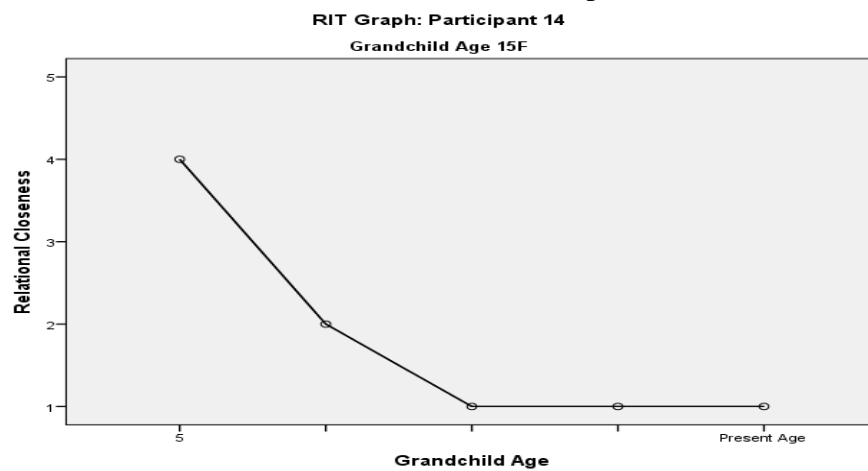
*Figure 1.0.* Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 11



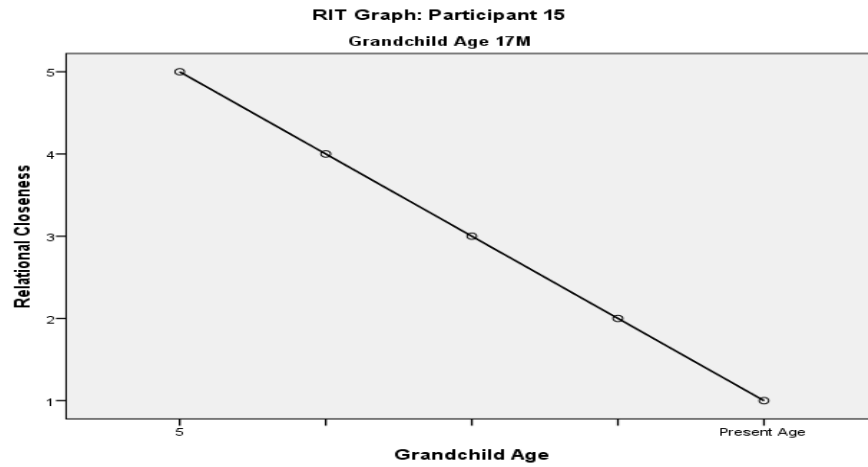
*Figure 1.1.* Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 12



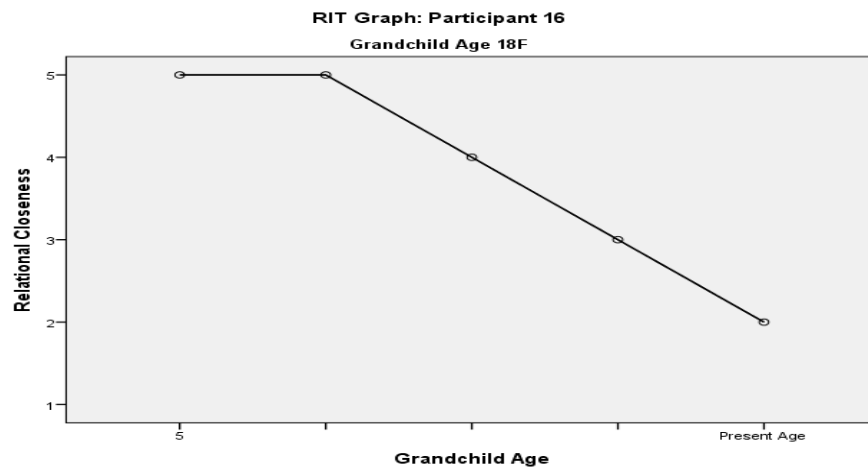
*Figure 1.2.* Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 13



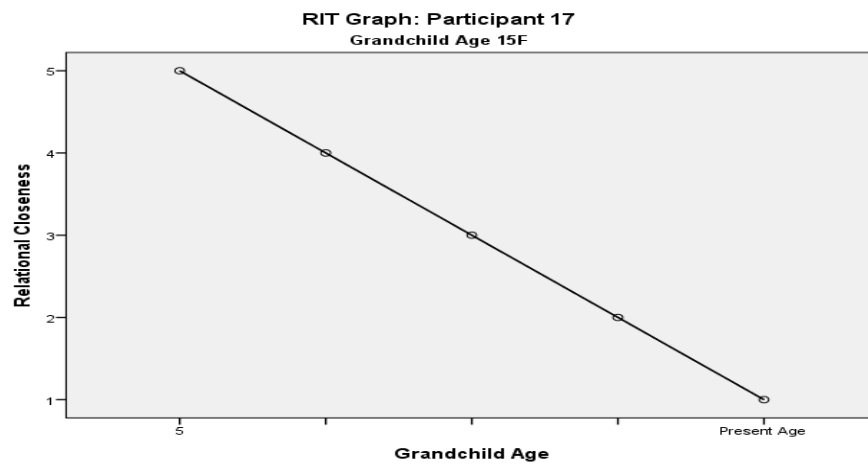
*Figure 1.3.* Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 14



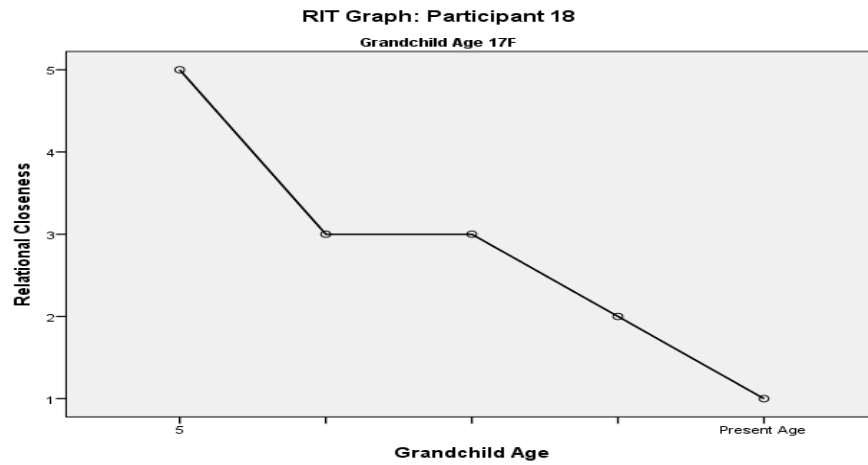
*Figure 1.4. Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 15*



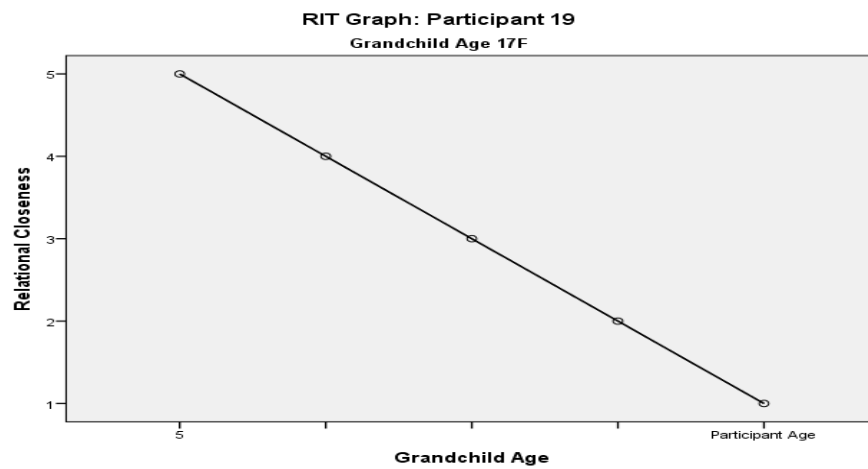
*Figure 1.5. Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 16*



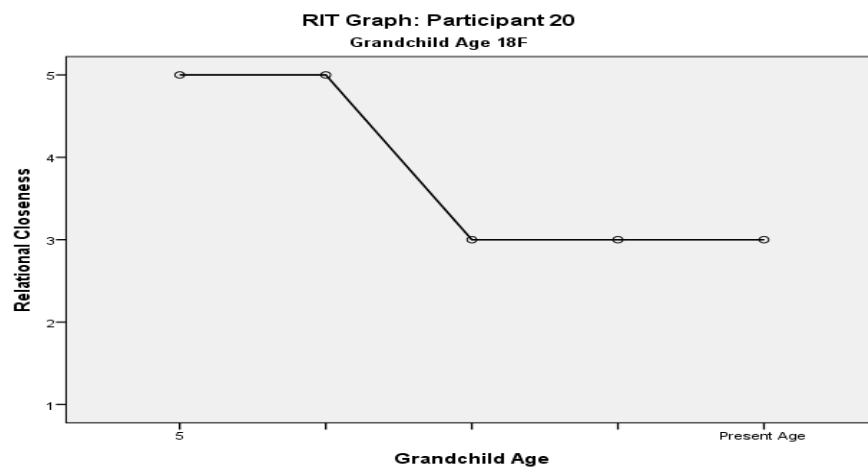
*Figure 1.6. Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 17*



*Figure 1.7. Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 18*



*Figure 1.8. Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 19*



*Figure 1.9. Decrease In Relational Closeness, Participant 20*

## **Consistent Relational Closeness**

The second most common ( $n=8$ ) trend in relational closeness is labeled as consistent relational closeness characterized by no changes in closeness. In contrast to the mean grandchild age of the previous category ( $M= 15.8$ ;  $SD= 1.9$ ), the grandchildren within this category are relatively young ( $M = 13.2$ ;  $SD = 2.3$ ) and consist of an equal number of female ( $N=4$ ) and male ( $N=4$ ) grandchildren. Participants who drew a straight line on the RIT graph concluded that they had not experienced any changes in relational closeness, however the lines were drawn at different points on the graph, indicating that some grandparents ( $N=4$ ) maintained significant closeness (5 on the likert scale), two ( $N=2$ ) grandparents indicated a moderate level of closeness (3 on the likert scale) and one participant indicated their feeling of minimal psychological closeness (1 on the likert scale) towards their grandchild. The mean level of relational closeness for this category is 3.8,  $SD= 1.7$ . The variations in levels of closeness are evidence that although some grandparents may not feel that their relationship with their grandchild has changed, the levels of closeness at which these relationships seem to be anchored are indeed different.

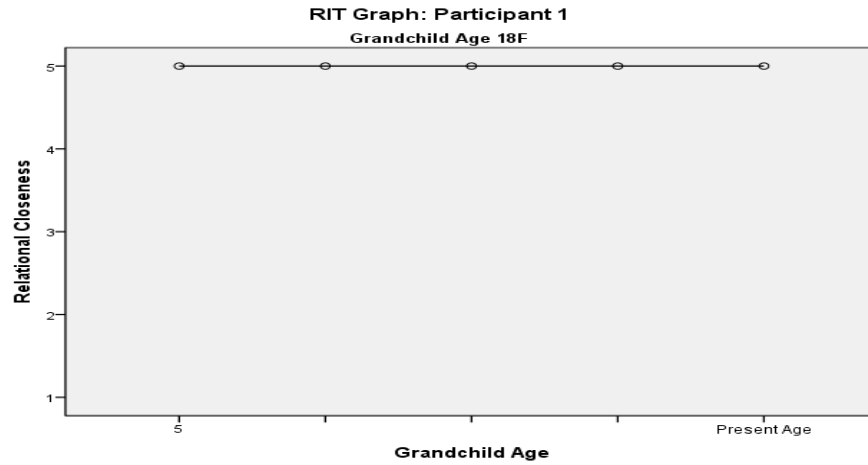


Figure 2.0. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 1

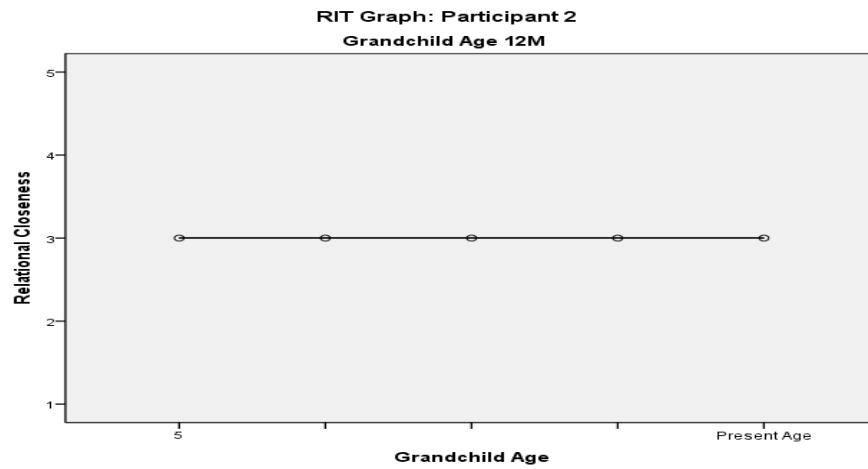


Figure 2.1. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 2

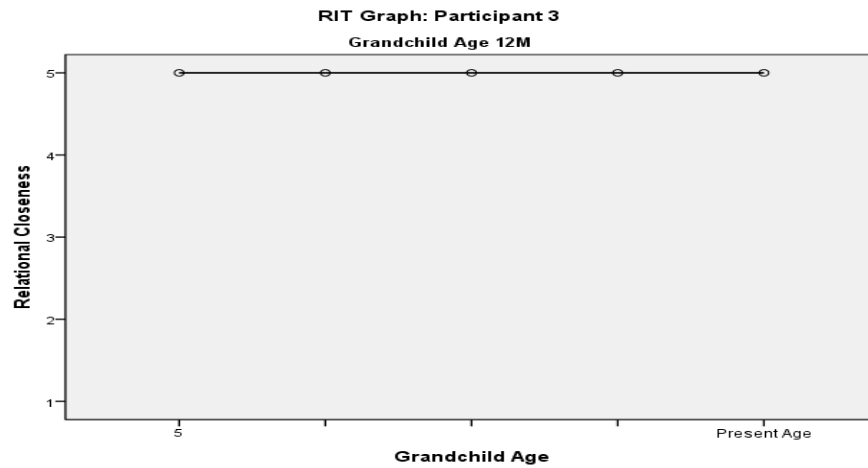


Figure 2.2. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 3

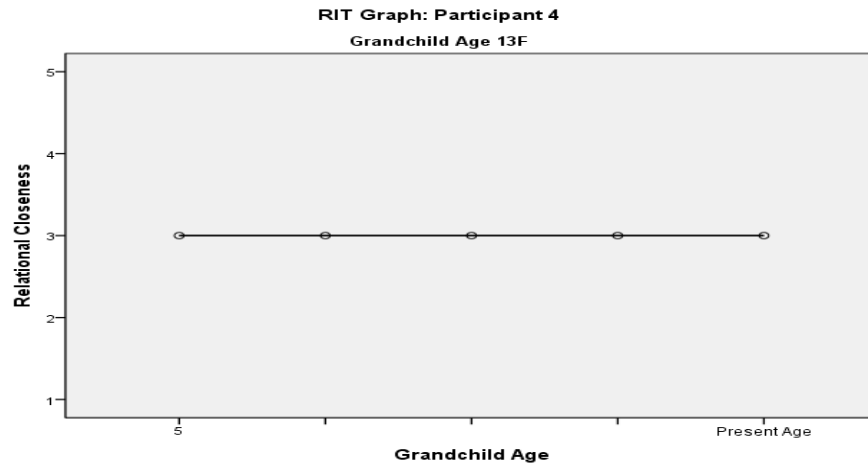


Figure 2.3. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 4

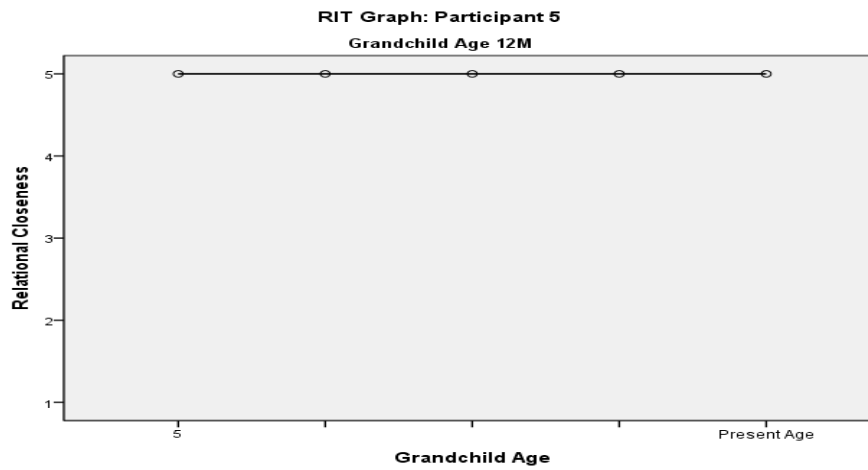


Figure 2.4. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 5

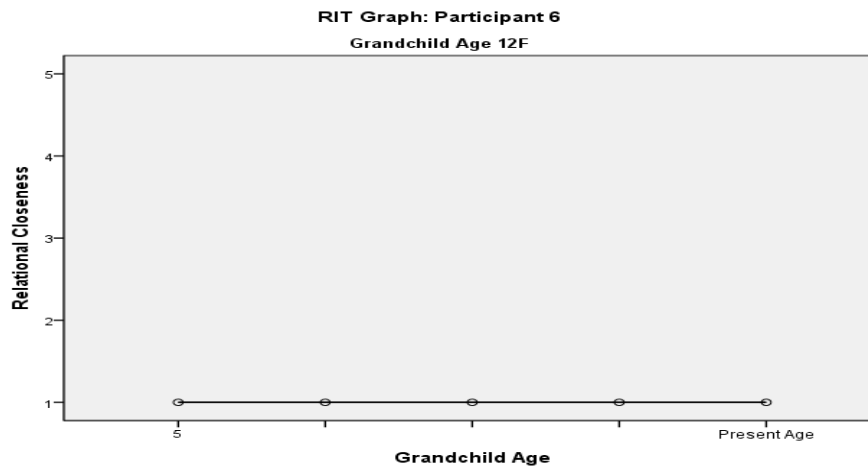
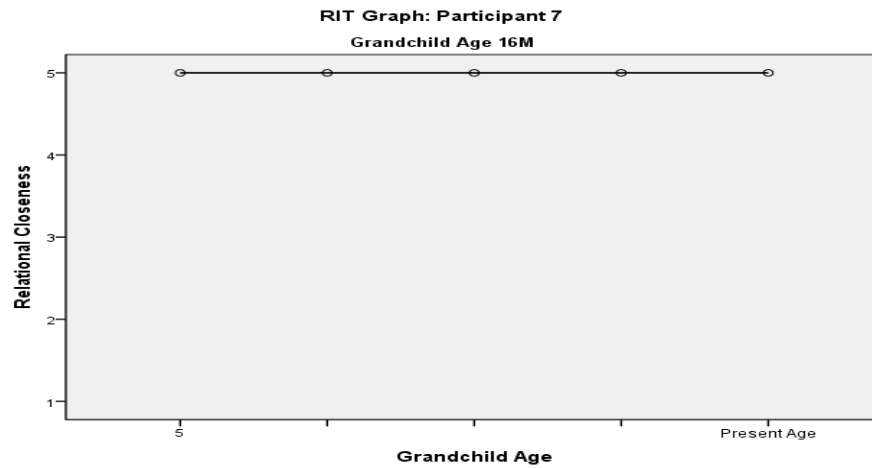
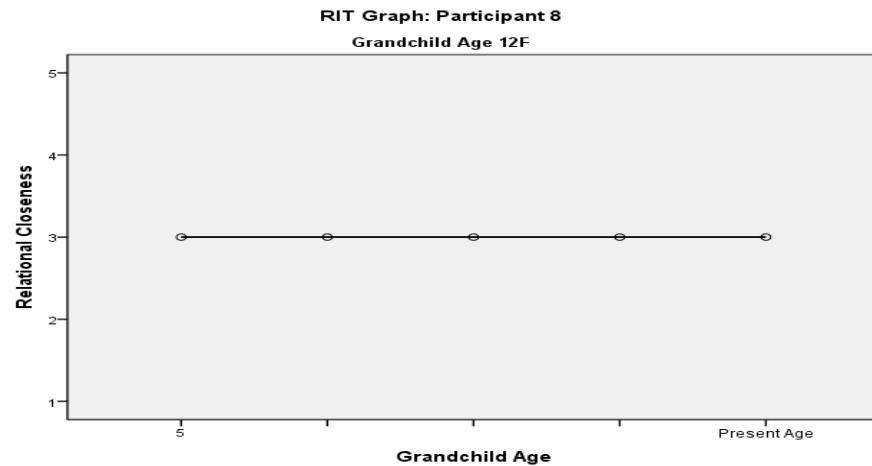


Figure 2.5. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 6





*Figure 2.6. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 7*

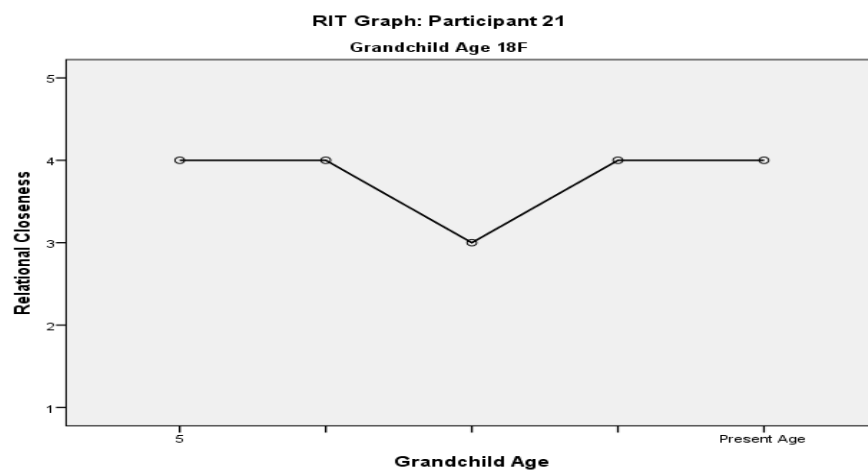


*Figure 2.7. Consistent Relational Closeness, Participant 8*

### **Minimal Changes in Closeness**

The next most frequently cited category of relational trajectories (N=5) includes grandparent grandchild relationships that include specifically positive or negative changes in relational closeness, yet reflect minimal changes in closeness on the graph. This category encompasses RIT graphs that changed only by one point on the likert scale, indicating minimal impact of turning points. Generally,

these relationships are projected as having high levels of relational closeness at both the beginning ( $M=4.6$ ;  $SD=.65$ ) and the present stage of the relationship ( $M=4.3$ ;  $SD=.83$ ) despite the minor shifts that occur on the graph. The grandchild age ( $M=15.2$ ;  $SD=2.16$ ) is slightly higher than the previous category wherein no turning points were identified. The nature of the lines on this graph are somewhat consistent in that they tend to level off and although they are not entirely consistent, they are certainly not dramatic in nature and indicate an authentic sense of relational changes that take place over time.



*Figure 3.0.* Minimal Relational Closeness, Participant 21

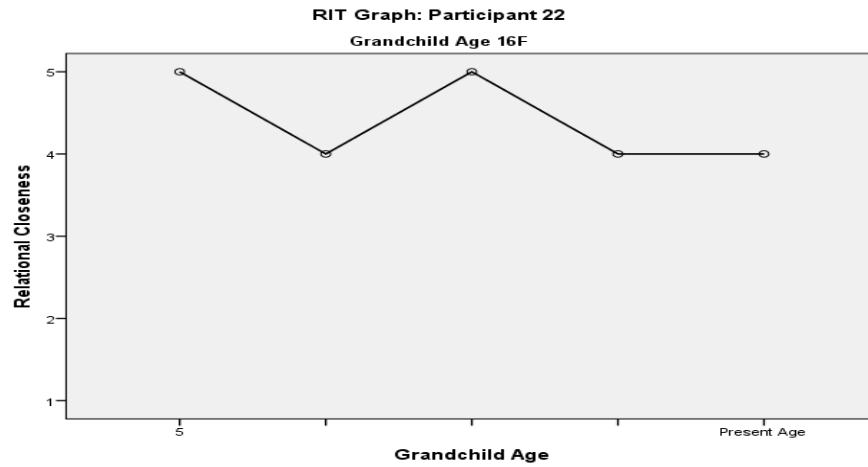


Figure 3.1. Minimal Relational Closeness, Participant 22

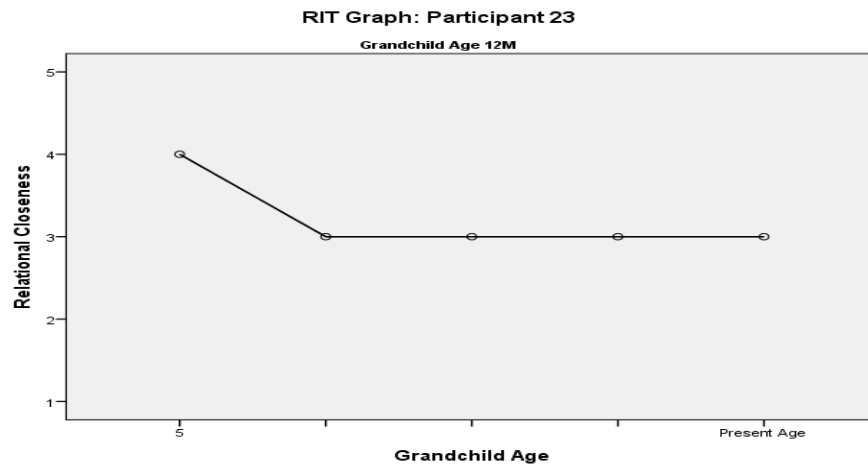


Figure 3.2. Minimal Relational Closeness, Participant 23

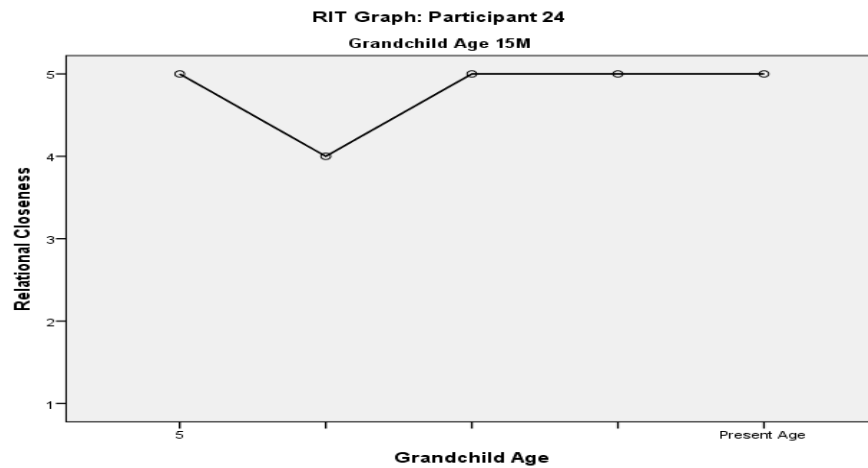


Figure 3.3. Minimal Relational Closeness, Participant 24

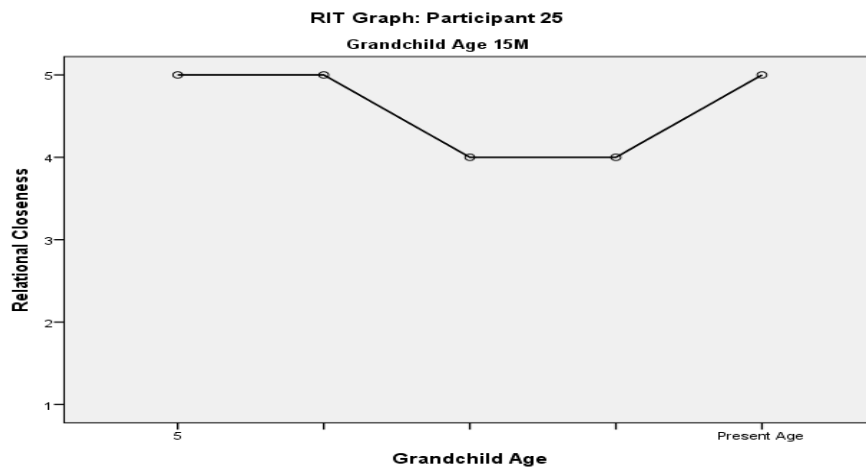
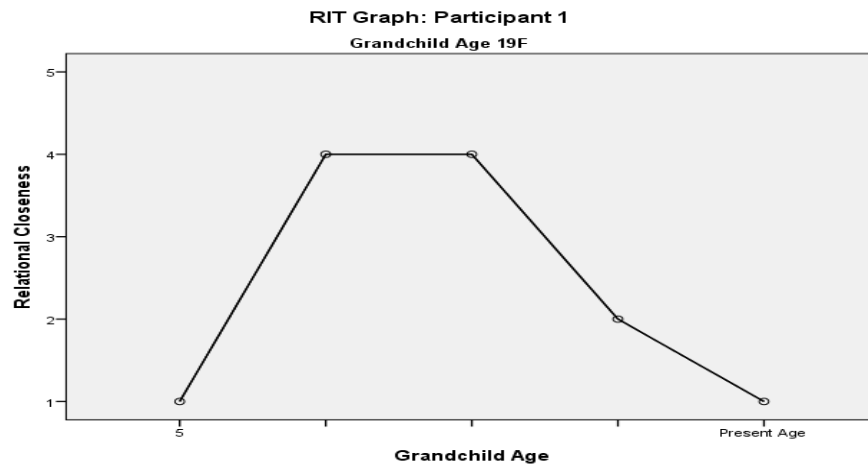


Figure 3.4. Minimal Relational Closeness, Participant 25

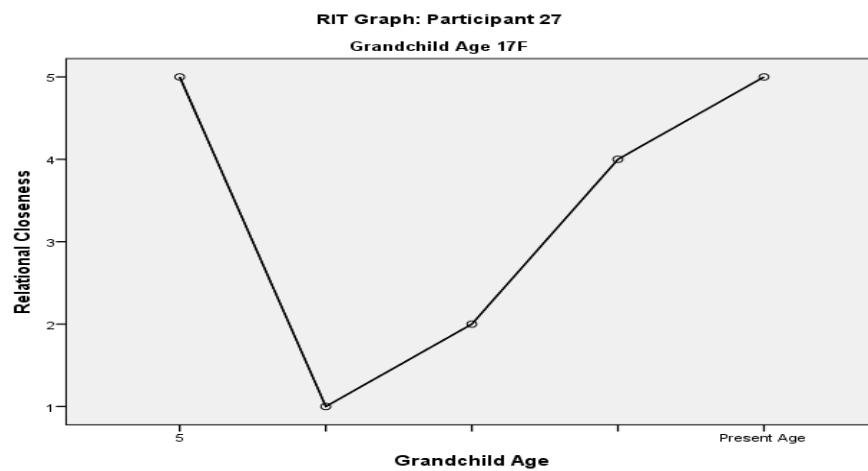
### Multidimensional Changes in Relational Closeness

Unlike previous RIT graphs illustrating the grandparent grandchild relationships that indicate a somewhat consistent relational trajectory (i.e. consistent relational closeness and decrease in relational closeness), the next category includes five participants whose relationship with their grandchild yields extreme increases and decreases in relational closeness. Because of the dramatic nature of these lines, this category was labeled *Multidimensional Changes in Closeness*. This category contains dramatic rises and falls in relational closeness that are not generally consistent with one another, for example, Participant 1 (see Figure 4.0.) shows a steady increase in closeness followed by a brief plateau, then a dramatic fall in the relational quality while Participant 2 (see figure 4.1.) displays an opposing relational trajectory that begins quite high, decreases dramatically, then rises again to a high level of closeness. Overall, participants in this category indicated that levels of closeness began at different levels of closeness ( $M=4.0$ ;  $SD=2.0$ ) and ended in a variety of levels ( $M=3.8$ ;  $SD=1.6$ )

despite the volatile changes between age 5 to the grandchild's present age. Like the relational trajectories within this category, the age of these participant's grandchildren also varies ( $M = 14.0$ ;  $SD = 3.0$ ). Four participants within this category completed the graph indicating a positive shift in closeness while only one participant displayed a low level of closeness in their current relationship with their grandchild.



*Figure 4.0.* Multidimensional Changes in Relational Closeness, Participant 26



*Figure 4.1.* Multidimensional Changes in Relational Closeness, Participant 27

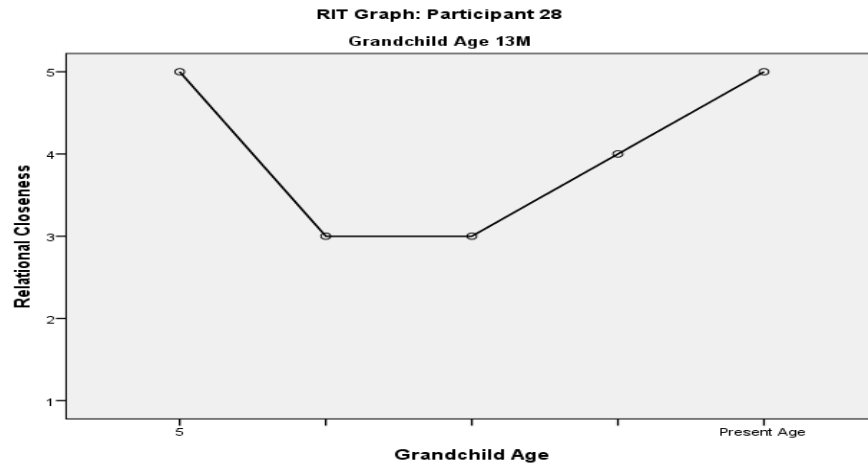


Figure 4.2. Multidimensional Changes in Relational Closeness, Participant 28

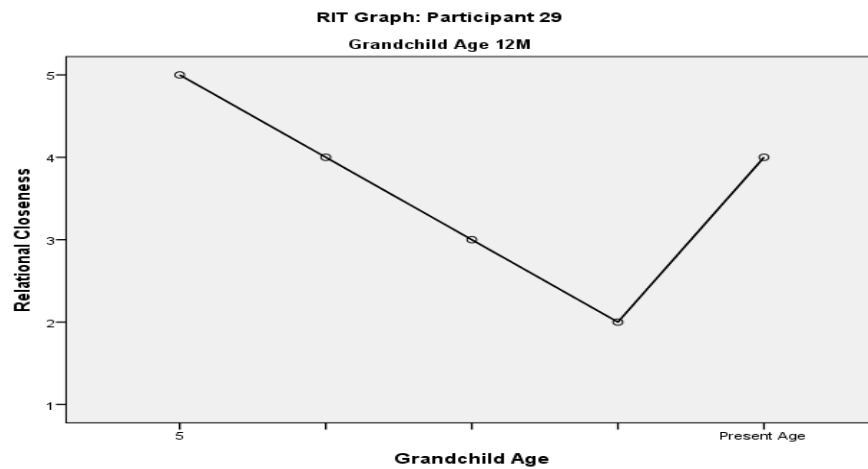


Figure 4.3. Multidimensional Changes in Relational Closeness, Participant 29

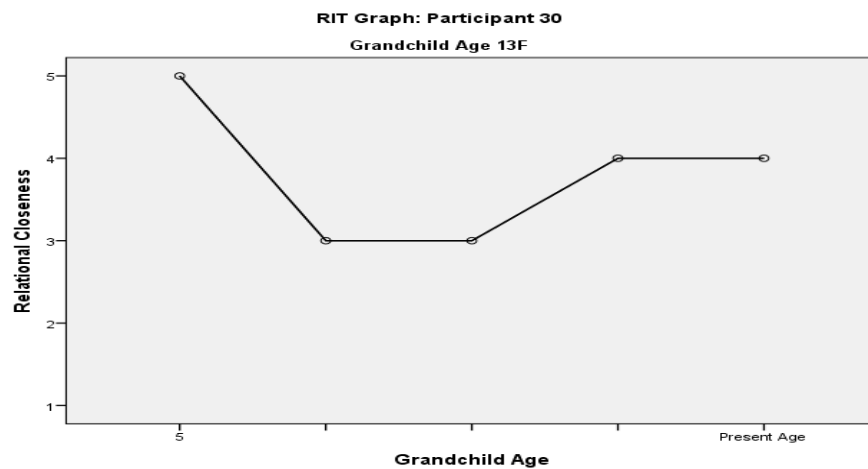


Figure 4.4. Multidimensional Changes in Relational Closeness, Participant 30

## Increase in Relational Closeness

The final, and least frequently cited ( $N=2$ ) category of RIT graphs indicates an increase in relational closeness over time. Within this category, participants indicated that their initial closeness to their grandchild was relatively lower than other RIT graph categories ( $M= 2.0$ ;  $SD = 1.4$ ) and naturally ended in higher levels of closeness ( $M=4.5$ ;  $SD= 0.7$ ). Grandchildren in this category were relatively young ( $M=13.0$ ;  $SD= 1.41$ ) compared to grandchildren whose relationships decreased over time with their grandparents ( $M = 15.8$ ;  $SD = 1.9$ ).

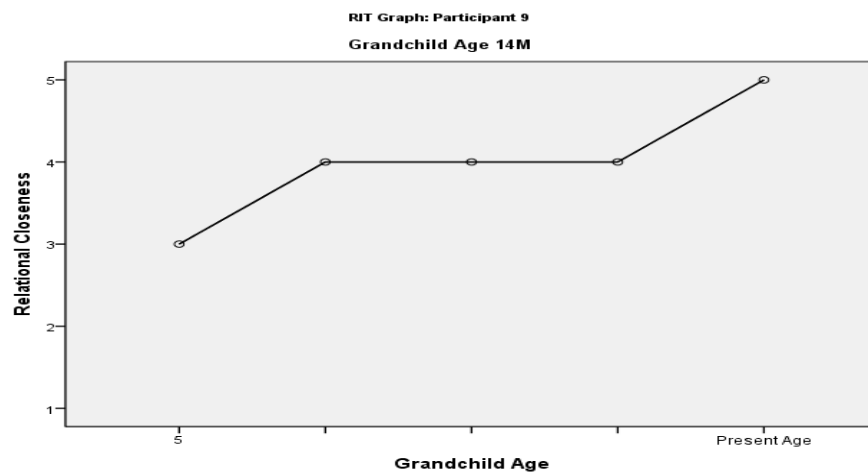


Figure 5.0. Increase in Relational Closeness, Participant 9

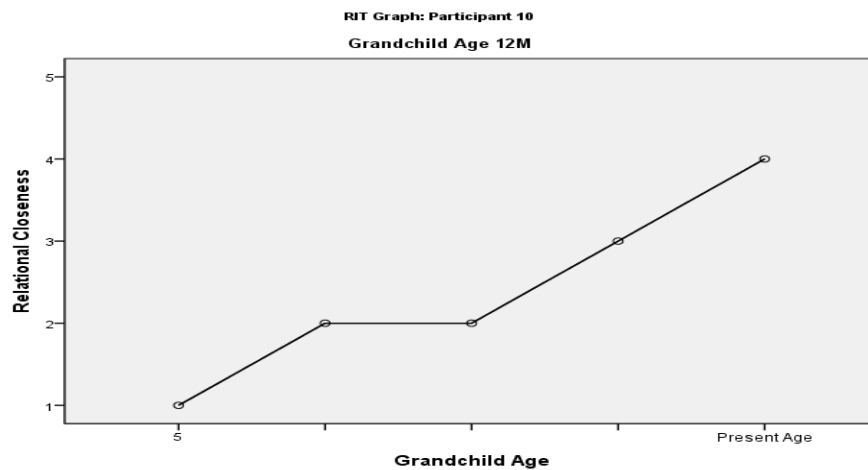


Figure 5.1. Increase in Relational Closeness, Participant 10

## **Discussion of Results**

This study combines several areas of existing social science and aging research in order to provide new insights into the important yet understudied relationships between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren in the long-distance context. Utilizing a turning point methodology to better understand these relationships allows for the development of a deeper appreciation for the different events that shift these relationships. Examining these relational trajectories through analysis of individual RIT graphs also reveals the diversity within and between these relationships yielding an authentic understanding and recognizing the multiple ways that grandparent-grandchild relationships can develop, improve, decline, and shift over time.

Furthermore, this study provides insight into two generational groups that are equally stereotyped within society. While grandparents may be heavily stigmatized as a result of their age, adolescents are plagued as being in a somewhat nomadic stage in terms of development, lacking credibility and life experience. This adolescent stage of exploring different interests and gaining independence is of sharp contrast to the life stage that many grandparents are currently in, which is characterized as a far more settled state than their youthful counterparts. The contrasts and similarities between these two populations is cause for further exploration. The family setting poses itself as a natural and particularly strong environment for this exploration, seamlessly bridging together these two generations and allowing for these valuable relationships to be shaped over time.



## Identification of Turning Points

The first research question sought to understand the dynamics of the grandparent grandchild relationship through identifying what relational events, if any, impact psychological closeness between grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren. Of the 30 grandparents interviewed for this study, 22 participants were able to identify at least one turning point that they had experienced with their grandchild, while 8 participants indicated that there had been no changes in relational closeness with their grandchild. Together, participants revealed a total of 99 turning points that were identified into eight different categories.

The first category, *Spending Time Together* emerged as the most commonly cited turning point that positively impacted relational closeness between grandparents and their grandchildren. This category included visits with a grandchild, vacations together, babysitting, or other temporary caretaking. Face to face interaction with a grandchild seemed to be the most profound way to both build and sustain relational closeness between participants and their grandchildren. Despite the physical distance between these participants and their grandchildren, spending time together on a somewhat frequent and consistent basis seemed to directly influence feelings of relational closeness. Often, when participants spoke of these turning points, they indicated feelings of bonding with their grandchild, but also the sense of being included, trusted, and needed by the family unit. The time spend with their grandchildren indicated the fulfillment of a certain relational entitlement that many participants felt that they have as a grandparent. In the same regard, there were clear indications of dissonance when

these expectations were not fulfilled and grandparents did not get to be highly involved in the lives of their grandchildren.

*Family Relational Dynamics* proved to be more complicated than the previous category. This category includes many instances of conflict, divorce, abuse, and other family changes that ultimately served to shift the grandparent grandchild relationship. The relational impact of these events was both positive and negative for participants and their grandchildren. Divorce between parents was the most commonly cited event within this category. In many cases, not only was the grandparent grandchild relationship negatively influenced by a divorce, but the grandparent's relationship to other peripheral family members (such as x-in laws) is also jeopardized. In other instances of divorce, the grandparent grandchild relationship was strengthened. As a result of divorce, some participants found their relationship with their grandchildren to grow as they were able to emotionally support their grandchildren throughout the difficult divorce process.

In some cases, these turning points included grandparent-grandchild cohabitation, which, like divorce, inconsistently impacted relational closeness. Some participants expressed that living with a grandchild was a bonding experience that served as a solid relational foundation, while other participants expressed some regret at having to play a dual parent-grandparent role while living with their grandchild. The frequency of these turning points indicate that grandparent relationships are indeed impacted by ordinary family events and

circumstances, however, the ways in which these relationships are ultimately impacted varies greatly between individuals and families.

The turning point category of *Geographic Distance* was a significant and expected component of examining these long distance relationships. For many participants, feelings of psychological disconnection were associated with an inability to consistently see their grandchild on a regular basis, this disconnection proved to impact other family relationships, particularly between grandparents and parents as participants often expressed disappointment that their grandchild's parents did not facilitate visits. Communication struggles were broadly discussed within this category, many challenges of long distance communication were discussed including opposite schedules, change in time zones, and incongruent technology use (such as a grandparent wanting to speak over the phone and a grandchild wanting to text).

This category also included instances of geographic relocation, usually by way of grandparents moving to a retirement community. This literal increase in distance proved to be a challenge both socially and emotionally for many participants who previously lived within a close proximity to their grandchildren. This category also included the more symbolic instances of participants understanding the impact that living far away has had on their closeness to their grandchild and wondering if being long-distance has taken away from the grandparent experience. Often, participants spoke of their limited capacity of involvement because of this physical distance and identified tangible barriers to

cultivating a relationship such as cost of travel, waning health, and the stress of travel that ultimately deterred them from seeing their grandchildren more often.

A unanimously negative turning point category, *Lack of Relational Investment*, displayed a general feeling of disinterest in the relationship from either the grandparent or the grandchild. Within this category, participants often spoke of their relationship with their grandchild as “one sided”, indicating that their efforts to communicate through letters, phone calls, or inviting their grandchild to visit are not reciprocated by their adolescent grandchildren. It seems that turning points within this category largely made participants feel psychologically shut out or unwanted by their grandchildren, and in many cases the emotional ramifications of these turning points permanently impacted participant’s perceptions of their ability to strengthen these relationships.

A most significant characteristic of this category was the discussion of participant’s expectations of being a grandparent. Often, participants acknowledged these expectations and that their relationships were not likely to develop into the bond that they had envisioned before becoming a grandparent. As one participant explained, the decline of his relationship with his 19-year-old granddaughter, it is evident that his expectations of this role were not completely met

Strangely enough, we bought this model home because of the layout, because our bedroom and two bedrooms are here, one is a den, but we put in a queen size sleeper sofa with a big air mattress pillow, and twin beds in anticipation of both families coming out periodically...that never

materialized. It was probably more wishful thinking on my part than reality or practicality, because being retired, our mindset is that we get in the car and go whenever we damn well please, without, thinking in terms of, they don't have those liberties.

Many participants articulated this struggle between their expectations of this role and the reality of their situation, realizing that while they may have been eager to cultivate an ideal grandparent-grandchild relationship, this cannot be done unless both members of the dyad are willing and capable of doing so. As one participant explains, his own relational investments have decreased over time with his 12-year-old granddaughter

I'm happy to see her when I see her, but I don't particularly go out of my way to cultivate a long distanced talking relationship with her. You know, more out of a sense of duty, um, to a child we barely know, we contribute to her college fund, and that's ok, and I do that more for her dad than I do for her. So I feel that that's the only valid contribution that I can make at this point, I used to write letters to her, I encouraged her to initiate a correspondence, but today's generation they don't know about writing letters, they know about emailing, texting, which also means that they cannot spell either, so as I said, I have curtailed my activities.

Participants were candid in their explanations of why their grandchildren did not want to sustain these relationships; most of them expressed the assumption that their grandchildren wanted nothing to do with an "old person" and that the generational difference proved to be a communicative barrier. The projected

attitudes of participants toward their own identity as a grandparent proved to be quite interesting throughout the analysis stage of this study because of the overt descriptions of the grandparent role as being socially undesirable. This is evident in one participant's explanation of her decline in closeness with her 16-year-old granddaughter

When we go home in the summer it was still kind of nice but uh like all kids of a certain age would rather be with their friends... you know you can only grab their attention for so long, especially when your old and dull.

This finding, although only reported by a small sample of participants poses new questions about the impact that ageism may have on these relationships and on how individuals experience and fulfill these roles based on societal and cultural stereotypes.

The next category, *Lack of Relational Investment*, is distinct from, although similar to, the category of *Lack of Free Time* in that the inclination to cultivate or sustain a relationship is omitted from one or both sides of the dyad. Although also a negative turning point, *Lack of Free Time* turning points were generalized as less detrimental to the relationship. A grandchild having limited time to spend with a grandparent was often seen as a necessary component of child development which participants generally did not take personally and did not seem emotionally hurt by their grandchild's lack of free time. The impact on closeness, although negative, was not as substantial perhaps because participants were more accepting of a grandchild's inability to make significant relational

investments (i.e. visits, phone calls etc.) as a result of being involved in many activities as opposed to a grandchild's reluctance to have a conversation with them. There was more emotional hurt associated with a grandchild's lack of relational investment, which inevitably impacted feelings of emotional closeness to a greater degree. Within this category, it is also most interesting to identify the stereotypes and assumptions that participants utilized when describing their teenage grandchildren.

In all cases, participants who identified turning points in this category felt as if they were not a priority in the busy schedules of their grandchildren, yet realized that there may be a time in the future when their grandchildren will mature enough to cultivate a relationship with them. Most participants indicated some sadness and regret that they, at such a distance, had not been able to play a significant role in their grandchild's activities and interests.

The category of *Relational Investment* included instances of either the grandparent or grandchild putting in significant effort into sustaining the relationship. This overall positive category included tangible investments, such as purchasing plane tickets for grandchildren to come visit, or more simplistic investments such as learning about a grandchild's interests and having conversations about those interests. The relational investments made by grandchildren included more symbolic relational efforts that proved to be incredibly meaningful for participants. Such investments were described by participants as catalysts for other positive turning points within these relationships. Not all relational investments are equal, yet they seemed absolutely

necessary to maintain participants feelings of emotional closeness to their grandchildren. Often, the relational investments made by both parties included an increase in communication in terms of quantity (i.e. more frequent phone calls from a grandchild) and in quality (i.e. a grandchild confiding in a grandparent about their insecurities). This category shows that there are many different forms of relational investment that both grandparents and grandchildren can make that will ultimately work to strengthen the relationship.

*Use of Technology* was cited as increasing relational closeness between grandparents and their grandchildren. This category included utilizing more modern forms of technology such as Skype, Facebook, and communicating through text messaging despite the long distance context of their relationships. Participants who identified these turning points credit technology with sustaining these relationships and spoke of how adapting their communication to be more modern has been the single most significant turning point within the relationship and allowed for more positive turning points to take place. Participants indicated that by using the same technology as their grandchildren, communication is more frequent and versatile; grandparents who use Facebook spoke of the joy they felt from seeing recent photographs or posts online and that they feel more involved and connected as a result of using Facebook. Facebook seemed, for many participants, to transform their traditional role as a grandparent into more of a friendship role wherein they are included in various aspects of their grandchild's life through sharing the same online social space as their grandchild's peers.



Participants expressed that technology was not only used as a medium of communication, but as a source of common interest. While technology readily helps to connect long distance individuals in instrumental ways, it also emerged in this study as a means of connecting two opposing generations that may seem to have stereotypically opposite interests. Grandparents indicated that using various forms of technology made them feel they had more in common with their grandchild, as one participant indicated when she spoke of what has brought her closer to her 13-year-old granddaughter: “The fact that I like modern day music, and so we talk about music, and I talk about music and they are shocked- she’ll say ‘grandma, you have that on your iPod?’ and I go ‘yeah I do!’” thus, technology develops as a way to not only confront the challenges of long distance relationships, but also may bridge some of the generational gaps within these relationships.

Participants who spoke of using technology to better cultivate a relationship with their grandchildren did not seem as threatened by ageist stereotypes as those participants who did not use technology as a medium of communication. It seems that connecting with a younger family member through these fairly recent media allowed these participants to strengthen their own perceptions of themselves as adaptive individuals who are able and willing to learn new technology. In many ways, this openness to new forms of communication is indeed a relational investment made by grandparents who are witnessing many forms of emerging technology. This category suggests that this kind of communicative adaption is essential to strengthening intergenerational

relationships, and perhaps even one's own self-appraisal throughout the aging process.

The final category, *Grandchild Gaining Independence*, was an expected theme due to the specific demographic focus on adolescent grandchildren ages 12-19. Because of the many important developmental stages within this relatively small age range, it is no surprise that a grandchild's shifting maturity works to change their relationship with their family members including their grandparents. Many of the symbolic coming-of-age rituals that take place during adolescence involve seeking independence and growing into an individual. Adolescents seek to develop a unique identity that is often separate from family members. Participants who identified turning points in this category often spoke of a grandchild "becoming a teenager" with many assumptions about their grandchild not wanting to spend time with family members, and concluding that they would rather spend time with friends during this developmental stage. One participant described her perception of her 18-year-old granddaughter's stage in development

Now I know that typically this is a common theme among teenagers in general, oh please, you're my grandmother, I don't even want to bother with you and I want my friends, I wanna call this one I wanna text that one

Unlike *Lack of Relational Investment* this category was more generally understood as being a temporary phase, often participants spoke of raising their own children and remembered the teenage years as more transitional and uncertain. Participants indicated that during this particular developmental stage,

communicative challenges arose that largely had to do with unpredictable shifts in hormones, as one grandmother describes of her 13-year-old granddaughter: “So, anyways, she went through a pre-puberty thing where there was just not any way to communicate with her and she was so quiet and withdrawn and shed burst into tears at some strange little thing.” Communication with teenage grandchildren proved to be an intergenerational dilemma for most participants, who found the idea of relating to a teenager uncomfortable at times and unnatural. For many participants, this stage seemed to be only a temporary setback in the relationship that was understood as a normative experience. These turning points were generally interpreted lightly as opposed to the category of *Lack of Relational Investment*, which seemed to contain more detrimental and hurtful relational turning point.

### **Impact of Turning Points on Relational Closeness**

The second research question sought to explore how the turning points identified by participants shifted these relationships in terms of increasing or decreasing relational closeness. Turning points were analyzed in terms of their impact on the grandparent’s perception of relational closeness to their grandchild revealing a clear distinction between positive and negative relational events was created. The categories of *Spending Time Together*, *Relational Investment*, and *Use of Technology*, all contained unanimously positive turning points that increased relational closeness. In many cases, the turning points within the category *Spending Time Together* included bonding through face to face interaction that was rare for many of these long-distance grandparents. The

memories of spending time together proved to be very meaningful for participants, and these memories seemed to both strengthen and sustain emotional closeness despite geographic distance. *Relational Investment* was also a unanimously positive category of turning points that participants experienced with their grandchildren. This category included more symbolic gestures of affection, caring, and effort made on the part of either a grandchild or grandparent. Finally, *Use of Technology* remained a positive influence on these relationships, often allowing grandparents to better communicate with their grandchildren and become integrated into their grandchildren's lives. Consistent with previous research by Waldron, Gitelson, and Kelley (2005) utilizing email technology seemed to positively impact participant's feelings of social connectedness with their grandchild.

The categories that indicated a decrease in closeness include *Lack of Free Time*, *Geographical Distance*, and *Lack of Relational Investment*. The category that showed the most significant decline in closeness was *Lack of Relational Investment*, which displayed rather prolonged instances of relational disinterest on the part of the grandchild or the grandparent. It was evident by the turning points in this category that lack of effort on the grandparent or grandchild's part equally contribute to the demise of these relationships. The category *Lack of Free Time* was generally associated with a less dramatic decrease in closeness. As previously discussed, most participants expressed that their grandchild's busy schedule was an understandable component of their life and remained proud of the many achievements that their grandchild boasted as a result of being involved in many

different activities. *Geographic Distance*, like *Lack of Free Time* displays a more gradual decline in closeness. Characterized by participants expressing a general understanding that their relational closeness is lessened only because of the external circumstance of physical distance. Participants often spoke of physical distance as a challenge to their relationship, but not a defining factor in their role as a grandparent. Thus, physical distance does indeed influence the grandparent-grandchild relationship; however, the results suggest that distance is not the sole factor that enables the strength of these relationships. Although distance may make cultivating a grandparent-grandchild relationship more difficult, making relational investments seems to be a positive step towards enriching these relationships despite distance.

Two turning point categories, *Family Relational Dynamics* and *Grandchild Gaining Independence* contained instances of both positive and negative relational changes that were entirely contingent upon the unique circumstances of each turning point. *Family Relational Dynamics* included many instances of family conflict that may typically be thought to deplete family unity (these turning points included instances of divorce, conflict, or child abuse) however, participants in this study indicated a wide range of impact, both positive and negative, that these events may have on family relationships. Some participants identified a divorce as a significant challenge to their relationship with their grandchild while other participants indicated that divorce strengthened the family and built resilience among the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Through this category, it became clear that grandparents are directly and

indirectly impacted by different events within the family and that the ways in which they are influenced is subjective.

The category, *Grandchild Gaining Independence* mostly indicated a decrease relational closeness. Closeness was reported to decrease as a result of a grandchild entering puberty; as a result of this developmental transition, psychological communicative barriers were readily established that depleted the closeness of these relationships. One participant, however, indicated that her 17-year-old granddaughter's maturity has brought them closer together in recent years and that she has been able to serve as an advocate for her granddaughter

For her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, I talked her mother into getting her on birth control pills, and she called me up and said 'Thank you thank you grandma!'

because it's just a fact of life and she knows that I was responsible because she knows, we have talked about it before, and I feel good about that, and so does she, she feels really good about it.

Although this was the only participant who spoke of becoming closer to her grandchild as a result of gaining independence, many participants spoke of looking forward to their potential future relationships that they will have with their grandchildren once they mature into young adults.

When probed, grandparents expressed enthusiasm for the future when their grandchild would appreciate the value of this intergenerational relationship. Even participants who displayed relatively low levels of relational closeness spoke optimistically of a change in the relationship once their grandchild gets a bit older, as one participant indicated when speaking of her relationship with her

18-year-old granddaughter “So part of that is the growing process and I cant wait until she is in my 20’s because maybe she’ll turn around and realize that I’m an important person in her life”. Another participant expressed a similar response when asked if she believes that her relationship with her distant 16-year-old granddaughter will improve

I do, I do, I think most teenagers have a relationship like that with adults, and I think of my own children when they were teenagers (laughs) and I will say, teenagers are about my least favorite age of people... personally, they are not my favorite age, I like little ones, and now my children are in their 30’s and I like them, they are much more human you know.

### **Analysis of Relational Trajectories**

This study sought to gain an understanding of the various trajectories of these relationships in order to answer Research Question 3. The RIT graphs were analyzed and categorized into five groups based on the course of the relationship throughout time. The Development of these categories served to reveal the variations of these relationships with respect to the grandchild’s developmental stage of adolescence. The trajectories reported by grandparents support the notion that many of these relationships fall under common relational paths as a result of many different external circumstances, variations in personality, and individual responses to family events. These trajectories indeed represent a variety of experiences that may or may not correspond with cultural expectations and serve to highlight the individual ways that grandparents fulfill their role. Nonetheless, it is important for grandparents to understand that these relationships, much like any

important relationship, are not contingent upon societal expectations, rather, they are the result of many different circumstances that both contribute to and take away from their quality and longevity. This analysis seeks to illuminate some of the ways in which these relationships may turn towards a greater level of relational closeness. In the next section, a discussion of these results will illuminate limitations pertaining to sample size, subjectivity, and data interpretation.

### **Limitations of the Present Study**

There are several limitations that must be recognized within this study. The sample is limited both in terms of size and demographic diversity. The results of this research should not be generalized to a larger population of grandparents, rather, should serve as an academic stepping-stone towards future research. The relational trajectories of two participants on the RIT graph were inconsistent with the content of their interviews. For these participants, multiple turning points were discussed while only a few were drawn by the participant onto the RIT graph. This proved to be a small methodological challenge; however, because only two participants had inconsistent graphs, this issue did not seem to compromise the validity of the study.

Another limitation of this study is the challenging and highly subjective nature of measuring relational closeness. Although a key component of the procedure is the clarification of the term “closeness” prior to participation, due to the subjective and highly individual nature of relational closeness, the term will undoubtedly yield some interpretation issues that cannot be controlled for



completely. For some individuals, quantitatively ranking their psychological closeness to a family member is an unusual and counterintuitive task, thus, it may be difficult to gauge these feelings and to analyze relationships in this way. Despite these limitations, the method and results remain salient in terms of utilizing qualitative methodology in order to explore the variety of relational trajectories within grandparent grandchild relationships.

Finally, these relational trajectories are not representative of participants' overall relationship with their grandchild: It is quite important to note that the trajectories do not analyze the relationship before the grandchild is 5 years old, nor do they reflect stages of young adulthood. Although some participants offered future predictions of their relational trajectories, there is no certain foresight into what changes will or will not occur in these relationships. The analysis of these trajectories should be interpreted with caution; it is likely that these relationships are still quite capable of further changes- positive or negative- that may take place after the stage of adolescents and during the transition into emerging adulthood. It is important to recognize that these limitations lend themselves for the improvement and thoughtful development of subsequent research studies pertaining to the grandparent grandchild relationship.

In light of these limitations, the results must be interpreted with caution and should serve as a foundation for future research that will address this methodological limitation perhaps through integrating member-checking, a more structured interview protocol, or conducting a longitudinal study to ensure reliability of results. Purposeful precautions were taken in order to ensure the

reliability of these results, however, there is significant room for improvement and future research should continue to address the methodological issues associated with this type of qualitative research. Given that there are several limitations surrounding this study, the next section utilizes these limitations to suggest directions for future research that may further illuminate the academic and practical use for grandparent-grandchild research.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Future Research**

There is unlimited room for growth and improvement within intergenerational family communication research, a topic that is bound to become far more prevalent in academic and practical literature. Expanded sampling could be conducted in many ways, given the importance of globalization, it may be wise to replicate this method among different cultural groups which would be useful in understanding the contrasts between grandparents of different ethnicities. Another extension of this study may take place in the context of baby boomer grandparents in order to determine generational distinctions and make predictions for this emerging large generation.

Human Development and Family Studies scholars may want to examine these relationships from the perspective of step-grandparents or grandparents of adopted grandchildren. These and other populations could be studied in order to cultivate a better understanding of intergenerational relationships within blended families. Finally, because of the prevalence of divorce within modern families, and of the frequency of divorce among the relatively limited sample in this study, it may prove useful to conduct further research surrounding the impact of divorce

on a grandparent's relationship to his/her family. This type of research may prove to be useful in post-divorce mediation, counseling, and forgiveness research.

Aside from the theoretical implications of this research, there are many practical implications for grandparents, particularly those who are considering relocating to a retirement community or who have family members considering a geographic relocation. Particularly for grandparents considering relocating to a retirement community, this research provides a relatable and understandable range of experiences that long-distance grandparents have had with their adolescent grandchildren. While this study does not seek to provide a "how-to" guide to successful long-distance grandparenting, it is the intention of this research to display different factors that may improve or sustain relational closeness between grandparents and grandchildren. This study reveals interesting and predominantly positive experiences surrounding the use of technology and grandparenting that may influence the decision of aging adults to engage in modern forms of communication such as text messaging, facebook, or skype.

There are also many common themes that arise from this research concerning adolescent development, the theme of *Grandchild Gaining Independence* shows a fairly common decrease in relational closeness that seems normative at certain points in development. Perhaps through this category, grandparents may find peace of mind in that others experience issues with teenage grandchildren as they move towards independence. This research may have implications for new parents who approach the grandparent relationship with

some uncertainty. Parents may gather from this literature the importance of this relationship as well as the ways in which it can be improved.

Families may also benefit from this research after coping with a tragedy of major family event (such as a death, divorce, or job loss). While major events may shake a family unit and test the strength of family relationships, there are certainly different mechanisms of coping and maintaining family unity after such events. This study shows that despite external circumstances, families may remain resilient and united. It is the hope of the researcher that this study illuminates the factors that inhibit and promote these relationships and that the practical implications gained through this exploratory study may strengthen family relationships across geographic and generational distance.

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## APPENDIX A

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM

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Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

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To: Vincent Waldron  
FAB

*fr* From: Mark Roosa, Chair *SM*  
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 02/24/2011

Committee Action: Exemption Granted

IRB Action Date: 02/24/2011

IRB Protocol #: 1102006073

Study Title: Intergenerational Communication;

Turning Points in Long- Distance Grandparent Grandchild Relationships

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2).

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

